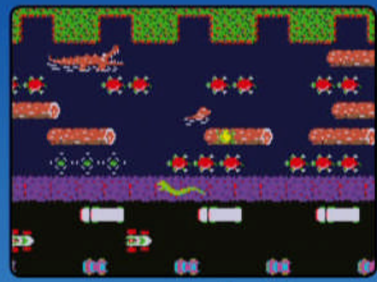
OLD!

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CLASSIC GAMES

retro GAMER™

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35 YEARS OF THE COLECOVISION

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MARIO KART THE UNTOLD STORY

SHIGERU MIYAMOTO, HIDEKI KONNO & TADASHI SUGIYAMA ON CREATING THEIR ICONIC 16-BIT RACING MASTERPIECE

"IT WAS A MULTIPLAYER VERSION OF F-ZERO"



Future

ISSUE 167

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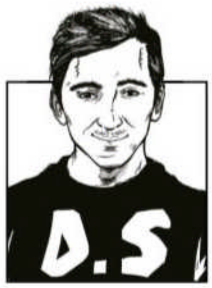
DARRAN JONES

It's got to be Mario. He's a legendary everyman who tackles anything with ease. A bit like myself.
Expertise:
Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine
Currently playing:
Mario Kart DS
Favourite game of all time:
Strider



NICK THORPE

I tend to pick Toad – the high acceleration seems pretty good when you're being battered by shells.
Expertise:
Owning five Master Systems (I sold two)
Currently playing:
Persona 5
Favourite game of all time:
Sonic The Hedgehog



DREW SLEEP

Toad's my man. Flip over to the cover and look at that face, how could you not pick that derpy little muppet?
Expertise:
Ultimate Despair
Currently playing:
Danganronpa 2: Goodbye Despair
Favourite game of all time:
Final Fantasy VIII



SAM RIBBITS

And now for something completely different – I'll go for Toad. Nobody will go for Toad… Huh? Nick did? And Drew!? Goddamnit!
Expertise:
Vehemently protesting *Gex* features. #TeamCroc
Currently playing:
Rocket League
Favourite game of all time:
Croc: Legend Of The Gobbos



DAVID CROOKES

Donkey Kong Jr., if only because it was pretty much the last time he was a playable character in a Nintendo game.
Expertise:
Amstrad, Lynx, adventures, Dizzy, and PlayStation (but is it retro? Debate!)
Currently playing:
Crash Team Racing
Favourite game of all time:
Broken Sword



MARTYN CARROLL

Got to be *Donkey Kong Jr.*. He's sadly underused in the *Mario Kart* world.
Expertise:
Sinclair stuff
Currently playing:
Lumo
Favourite game of all time:
Jet Set Willy



GRAEME MASON

Crikey only played it a couple of times… I'll go with Luigi – can you select him?
Expertise:
Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing:
BioShock
Favourite game of all time:
Resident Evil 4



PAUL DRURY

I always opted for Donkey Kong Jr. as a nod to the old arcade game more than anything else…
Expertise:
Jenson Button's gearstick
Currently playing:
Horizon Zero Dawn
Favourite game of all time:
Sheep in Space



LOADING...



***Super Mario Kart* certainly wasn't the first significant karting game – Sega's *Power Drift* says hello – but it's arguably one of the most important, creating a subgenre of racing games that still remain extremely popular today.** Sure, you can argue that the genre suffers from an overabundance of weak licences, but let's face it, that's hardly the fault of Nintendo, or its versatile plumber.

Our amazing behind-the-scenes access this month features a whole host of astonishing facts and anecdotes about Nintendo's popular SNES game, many of which I'd never heard of before. It explains how the game evolved from another popular Nintendo game, why Mario features in it and so much more. In short it's a superb read and I really feel you're going to love it.

In fact, I'm on such a *Super Mario Kart* high at the moment that we've decided to create two collectible covers for the popular game, one featuring the western art, the other with the original (and my favourite) Japanese art. I hope you enjoy them and please look forward to other celebratory covers of **Retro Gamer** in the near future.

As excited as I am about *Super Mario Kart* there's still plenty more goodness to enjoy this issue. We've got an excellent Yuji Naka interview where he revisits the creation of *Phantasy Star*, we go behind the scenes of Mosaic Publishing, speak to Ron Gilbert about *Thimbleweed Park*, revisit the arcade classic *Frogger* and celebrate 35 years of the ColecoVision. There's much more in the issue, but I'll leave it for you to find.

Enjoy the magazine.

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>> Load 167 Breathing new life into classic games

Don't forget to follow us online for all your latest retro updates

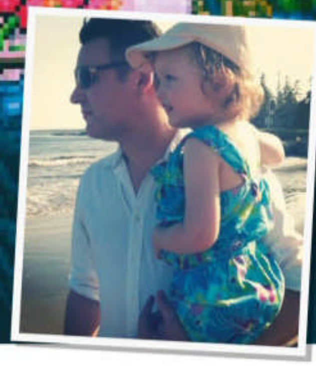
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» Christopher's daughter, Madelyn, is the inspiration for his new game.

FROM GHOUL POWER TO GIRL POWER

Christopher Obritsch on creating a Ghouls 'N Ghosts tribute for his daughter

CONTENTS

You have developer Christopher Obritsch's daughter to thank for this tribute to *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*. *Battle Princess Madelyn* exists because the young retro gamer wanted to play as herself in her favourite game, *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*. Now Christopher has been working hard with a small talented team to make his daughter's wish come true. He's taken the time out of development to tell us how everything is progressing.

Where did the idea for *Battle Princess Madelyn* originate?
When Maddi wanted to be in *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* and fight 'Green Head'. I said it was someone else's game, but I could make her one that was like it. Then she said, 'But girls can't be knights, Daddy. Only boys…' to which I answered, 'Pshh…What colour do you want your armour to be?' The answer? Pink!

How many people are involved in the project? Is your daughter involved? And how long have you been working on it now?
Right now, the development is myself and Daven Bigalow, with music by John McCarthy (of *Nintendo Quest*) and Javier (of *Maldita Castilla*), and of course Maddi serving as the creative think tank/battle princess in training! We're all held together thanks to my wife Lina and the excellent team at PR Hound.

***Ghosts 'N Goblins* is an obvious source of inspiration, but what**

READERS REACT

Your thoughts on Battle Princess Madelyn

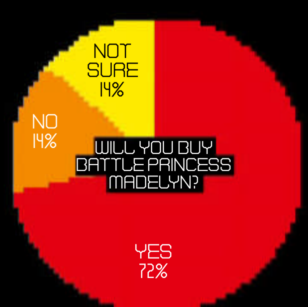
Backed it now, looks promising and relatively inexpensive.
Antiriad2097

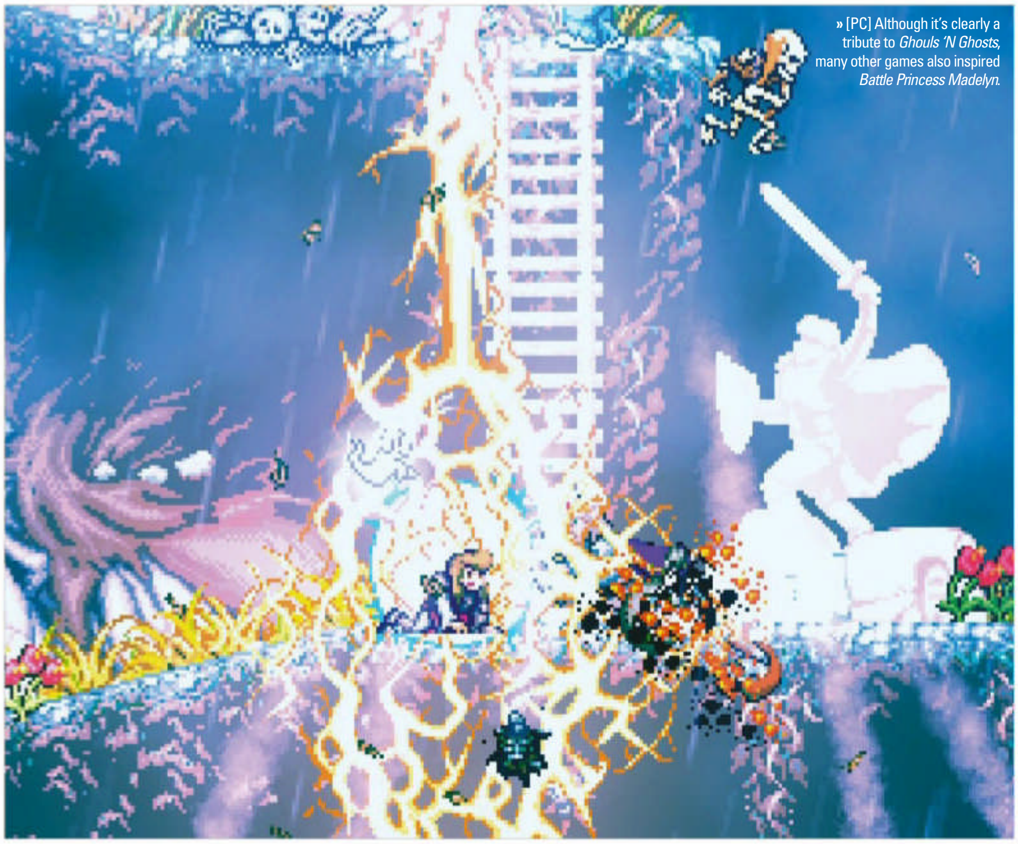
I'm pretty sure this game will be an instant classic among indie gamers and people who wants old school feels in modern games.
Jose Manuel Suarez

Who doesn't want more *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*?
Chris Flaherty

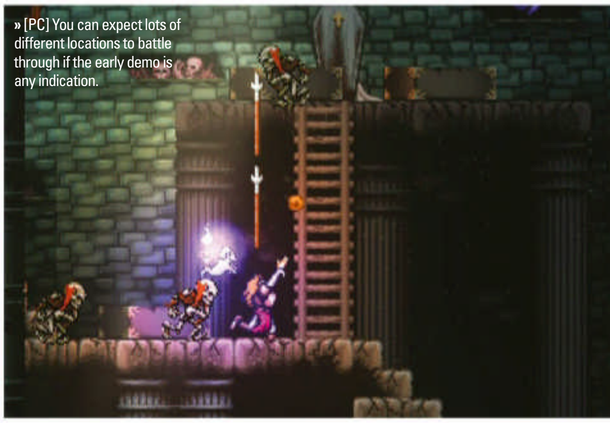
It looks awesome! Really looking forward to the physical Limited Run Games release as well
Raccoons Cave

It looks tremendous, now that it's been funded, though, I'll hang fire and buy it on release, as I've no idea which of the platforms it's being released for I'll have in 12 months time.
the_hawk





» [PC] Although it's clearly a tribute to *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, many other games also inspired *Battle Princess Madelyn*.



» [PC] You can expect lots of different locations to battle through if the early demo is any indication.



» [PC] Fans of *Forgotten Worlds* will be treated to a familiar sight on the first level.

other classics does your game pay homage to?

This game really pays homage to a plethora of 2D platformers. Although *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* is the primary attraction factor, we actually take some elements of *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap*, *Mega Man* and *DuckTales* in interesting ways too. Alongside the overworld map and free level selection of unlocked stages. We think this will remind players of many of the games of their childhood, or interest new gamers in playing some retro titles!

What sets your game apart from similar games?

It is bringing Eighties arcade action back, especially in the optional arcade mode, but merging it with a deeper story complete with cutscenes and free level roaming between unlocked stages. The collectibles and side-quests should give players plenty of extra fun too if they want.

Tell us the significance of the ghost dog, Fritzy.

Fritzy is your only constant companion throughout the whole game. In real life he lived by Maddi's side as her favourite doggy and we knew since he was very old he wouldn't be around much longer, so as a tribute to him, and a special way for Maddi to remember him by, we added him into the game. In the game, Maddi uses him for solving puzzles and fighting enemies. Two powers already in the game are the ability for Fritzy to shoot magic shots, or otherwise use the chomp power to charge up a bite attack against weaker enemies. The player will be able to switch between these powers at any time, but each will be unlocked as they progress through the main game! Fritzy also serves as your 'lives'. Killing enemies collects energy that can be used to do special powers, or otherwise to revive Maddi when she has been hurt. If Maddi has fallen and there's no magic left, then the player is starting the level again!

What's been the hardest thing to achieve in development, from a gameplay point of view?

The hardest part of *Battle Princess Madelyn* has been trying to intuitively express the new gameplay mechanics. With the pre-alpha build we didn't have time to include any explicit tutorials and control overlays, which is something that we've been thinking about based on how people are currently playing the demo. Perhaps then the most challenging aspect has been trying to expose the player to the secret stages without ruining the sense of accomplishment when a player solves the puzzle. We have some plans in the pipeline to address this, of course.

> **"This game really pays homage to 2D platformers. Although Ghouls 'N Ghosts is the primary attraction"**
> Christopher Obritsch

How important do you think the pre-alpha demo has been?

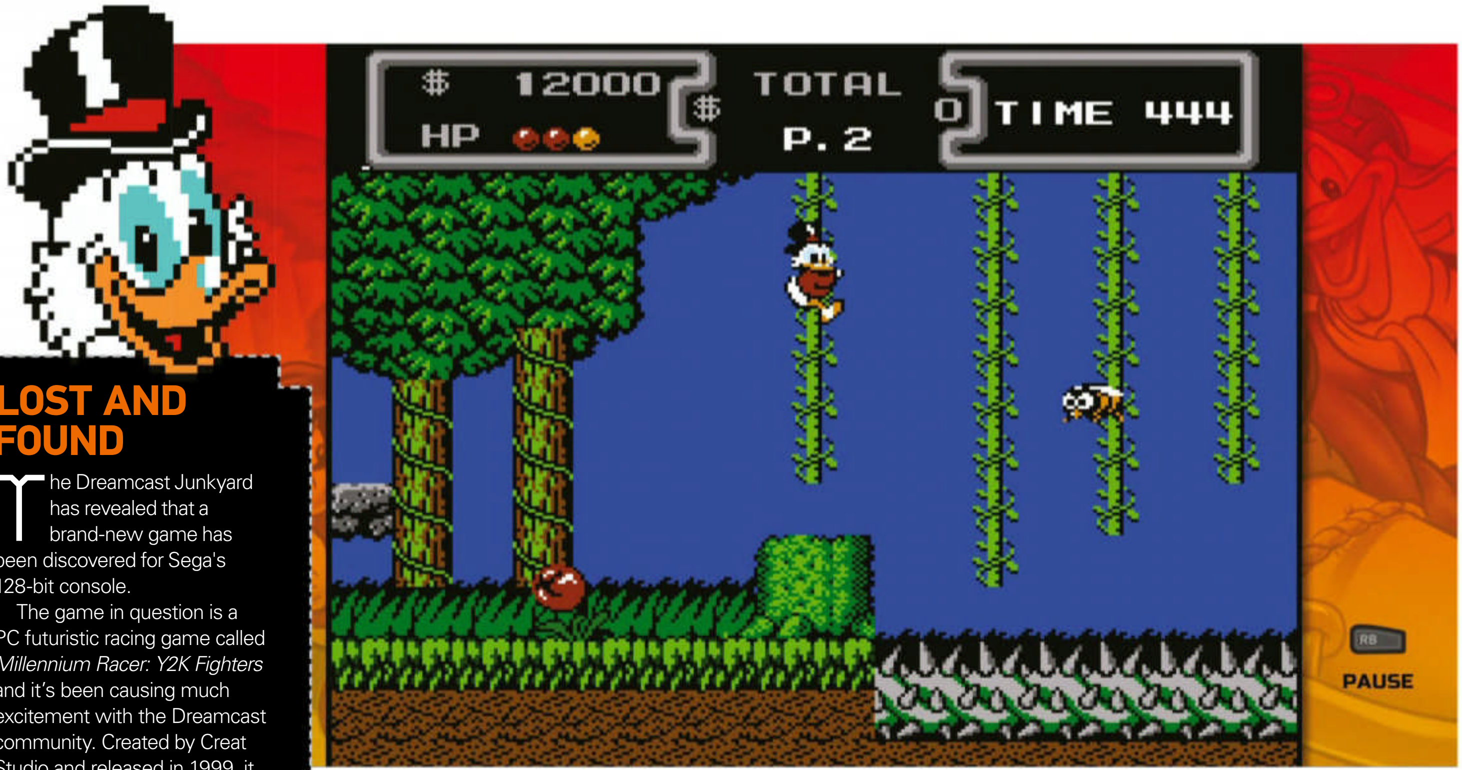
There's a big element of trust when asking the public to crowdfund your game, and so we knew we had to provide a really solid demo to give potential backers a clear image of what the game is aiming to play and look like. It also doubles as an excellent press tool, as it gives both reviewers and players something to talk about from their own experience.

How did you become involved with Limited Run Games for the physical release?

Limited Run has been in contact with Dan from the PR Hound team for some time in the past, but we were also introduced to them when we were considering options for physical release – because we knew we really wanted to make a proper on-the-shelf console title of this game. The timing feels right and the game feels large enough to justify a whole disc or cartridge to itself and Limited Run seems to be offering some of the most exciting platforms so far!

Why do you think independents now head to Kickstarter?

It's actually one of the best ways to get a game crowdfunded without sacrificing too much creative control over a project or ownership of the intellectual property, which independent games really need to innovate and thrive. The added benefit of Kickstarter is that it's a social platform and lets the consumers vote with their own money on what they want to see made and released, and what they don't. The Kickstarter gives developers like us great exposure to audiences, and the backers get exclusive rewards and copies of the game in exchange for their help in making the game come true! *



LOST AND FOUND

The Dreamcast Junkyard has revealed that a brand-new game has been discovered for Sega's 128-bit console.

The game in question is a PC futuristic racing game called *Millennium Racer: Y2K Fighters* and it's been causing much excitement with the Dreamcast community. Created by Creat Studio and released in 1999, it was also planned for release on Sega's Dreamcast, but like so many other Dreamcast games at the time, it ended up getting cancelled. Astonishingly, the Dreamcast port has not only been found, but appears to be complete and fully playable.

The Dreamcast Junkyard's owner, Tom Charnock, revealed in his blog update that he'd been made aware of the game by a fellow Dreamcast fan known as Kuririn84. Since discovering the game on an abandoned dev kit, Kuririn84 has been working with fellow fans, japanese_cake and Eric Fradella to get the game up and running so that anyone is able to play it.

While the emulation isn't perfect the game runs fine on an actual Dreamcast and is a surprisingly fun racing game with multiple tracks to race across. Who knows what other Dreamcast games are still out there waiting to be discovered?



» [Dreamcast] It's a shame *Millennium Racer* wasn't released as it's great fun to play.

CAPCOM DIGS UP NES CLASSICS

JOHN FACIANE ON CAPCOM'S NEW DIGITAL DISNEY COLLECTION

Capcom sent the internet into a spin recently, with the announcement that several of its classic NES Disney games would be heading to current systems.

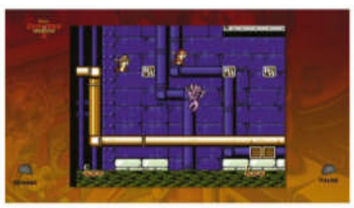
The *Disney Afternoon Collection*, which should be available now, is a compendium of six classic NES games from the late Eighties and Nineties that includes *Chip 'N Dale: Rescue Rangers*, *Darkwing Duck*, *TaleSpin* and *DuckTales*. Capcom producer, John Faciane is confident the collection is going to resonate with gamers. "During my childhood several of Capcom's titles had a huge impact on me, and some of my earliest fond memories of gaming were with *DuckTales* and *Chip 'N Dale: Rescue Rangers* in particular," he tells us. "Throughout the course of production I've been able to relive my childhood, and Capcom fans far and wide will be able to do the same."



» [NES] We never played *TaleSpin*, so it will be interesting to see how it holds up.

In addition to creating authentic versions of the original NES games, Capcom has added plenty of bells and whistles to keep the collection relevant to today's gamers. "We worked with the team over at Digital Eclipse to faithfully reproduce these classic games using their Eclipse Engine, just like we did with *Mega Man Legacy Collection*. In addition to having fully preserved the 8-bit originals displayed in beautiful 1080p we have included two optional video filters that players can apply to recreate the early Nineties gaming experience complete with CRT scanlines and ghosting."

Each game also features brand-new Boss Rush and Time Attack modes, along with a Rewind feature, something James feels will be popular. "When we look back on the 8-bit era of games we tend to look at them through a nostalgic lens, and we often forget how challenging some of these games were," he continues. "We wanted to find a way to make these games more accessible to a newer generation of gamers. The Rewind button can only be used during regular gameplay and is disabled in the Boss Rush and Time Attack modes."



» [NES] Capcom's NES games weren't the easiest around, so the new Rewind facility will be very useful.

The final addition is the Disney Museum, which is similar to the exhaustive vault found in Capcom's similar *Mega Man* collection. "Since these classic Disney games are near and dear to many gamers' hearts we decided to add as much extra content as we could to celebrate their legacy," concludes John. "I don't want to spoil everything we have in-game, but we have a large collection of things like production art, sketches, concept work, and classic advertisements showcased across several in-game galleries. In addition, we also have a music player where players can listen to in-game music tracks."

Despite the compilation consisting entirely of NES games, the Switch isn't listed as receiving a port, with the digital-only release earmarked for PS4, Xbox One and PC. Expect a full review in the next issue of the magazine.


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MICROIDS
PC DVD ROM
PS4
XBOX ONE
pqube
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JEWEL IN THE CROWN

BOXED 48K ZX SPECTRUM

■ "I was real lucky with this one – the box is in near-perfect condition and the whole thing only cost me £21 about six years ago. You'd be lucky to get one for under £100 now in the same condition."

PAID: £21



DEUS EX MACHINA

"I managed to meet Mel Croucher, who designed it, a few years back and he kindly signed this copy for me."

PAID: £8

SHADOW OF THE UNICORN

"This copy is a bit ropey but it's one I got in 1989 from the part exchangers who were looking to go 16-bit. I was tempted to get another copy in better condition, but now they're going for £60-£70 so I'll stick with this one."

PAID: £2

MULTIFACE 128

"I sold my original Multiface about a year before I got back into retro games. I managed to buy this one, which actually came with more extras than mine, a few years back."

PAID: £24





BIO

NAME: Mark R Jones

TWITTER: @MarkRJones1970

ESTIMATED VALUE: £8,000

FAVOURITE SYSTEM: ZX Spectrum

FAVOURITE GAME: *Legend Of Avalon*

The Spectrum salvager

Readers take us through the retro keyhole

Mark R Jones is perhaps our most interesting collector yet, as he's the only one we've interviewed who collects the games he used to work on. Before he started work as a graphic artist for Ocean, he was a fan of the ZX Spectrum and still collects games for it today.

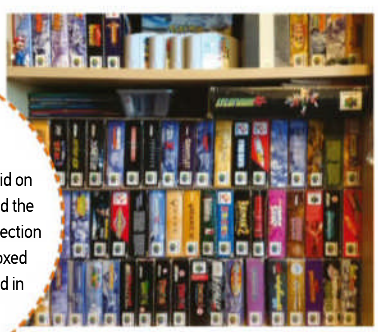
Although he's owned a ZX Spectrum since 1984, it wasn't until he started working for a computer games shop in 1989 that he first saw an opportunity to expand his collection. "We had a part exchange deal going on where customers would bring in their old systems and get money off a new 16-bit Amiga or Atari ST computer," he reveals. "Loads of people bought in Spectrums and C64s along with their software collections and were putting them towards the final cost. When I saw these huge boxes of old games coming in containing originals of all the games I'd played as a kid and had on various C90s I couldn't stop myself from picking the cream of those collections for myself, before putting the rest out on display to sell. So I guess I was into retro gaming in 1989."

Mark became more involved in Spectrum collecting in 2005 when he started becoming aware of the new resurgence in retro gaming. "I started filling the gaps in my collection and I'd end up looking out the window waiting for the postman when I knew something exciting was on the way. It was a similar feeling to back when I was a kid and I'd see a game I'd been waiting for actually on the shop shelf and ready to buy."

Mark's impressive collection of Ocean and Imagine games started off when he worked at the company. "While I worked there I would be able to get free original copies of games I had worked on when the first delivery turned up. I also picked up free copies of the titles I had seen being developed and thought were good – games like *Head Over Heels*, *Target: Renegade* and *The Great Escape*. It was only when I got into retro gaming again that I decided to try and get at least one copy of every title they released for either the Spectrum, C64, Amstrad, Amiga and Atari ST."

So does Mark have any advice for anyone interested in starting up their own collections? "Don't go overboard and don't collect just for the sake of collecting," he says. "A couple of years ago I'd have a month where I'd sit down and work out how much I'd spent and I'd ending up giving myself a minor heart attack. Only buy stuff you're going to use, even if that use is just looking at the artwork. Some of that old art evokes so many memories for me I don't even have to load it."

Mark is currently writing about his experiences with computer games. Search for #MarkJonesBook on Twitter for info and updates on its progress. ✱



CONKER'S BAD FUR DAY

"[This was] hard to get for a decent price and I had been outbid on four or five copies before I bagged the one I now own. The one in my collection looks brand new. I've seen unboxed cartridges go for over a hundred in the last few years."

PAID: £33


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Here's my bio... Paul Rose
Paul Rose is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator and chief writer of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser.* These days, he mostly writes for kids TV, but can still be found rambling on about games, old and new, for his daily website, Digitiser2000.com.

'Videogameyness'

What was the point at which videogames became ashamed of themselves? You know what I'm talking about: when they stopped just enjoying being what they are, and started trying to emulate the cool kids. Specifically, when was the moment that videogames started trying to be movies?

Was it when Cinemaware released *Defender Of The Crown*? When Steve Spielberg conceived of *The Dig*? Or perhaps when CD-ROM dropped a ton of allegedly interactive movies on us like an unsolicited dung delivery?

For me, one of the most risible moments in the history of videogames was *The Order: 1886*. Not because it was a bad game – merely grossly underwhelming – but because they chose to apply a grain effect to the graphics. For reasons that make literally no sense, they thought it'd be good if it looked as if it had been shot on celluloid.

I mean… what?! Why would you do that to a game? You don't have entire movies pixelating their pictures so they look more like videogames. Even that *Tron* sequel from a few years back was so embarrassed about its videogame origins that it looked more like the inside of a Berlin nightclub than any videogame anybody has ever played.

Games have never been more cinematic than they are now – and that isn't a compliment. The enormous, epic stories we have, the cut-scenes between two wax-eyed CGI dolls, the moments of portent… all of it leaves me cold. Not least, because so often the people creating these moments of cinematic grandeur fail utterly to understand the language of cinema. They'll pay lip service to it, without adding anything to it. And, indeed, obscuring the true worth and potential of videogames.

Beyond anything else, the thing I miss most about the games I grew up with is the economy of storytelling. Games were confident in themselves as games as an interactive alternative to books and TV and movies. They didn't feel the need to try and emulate another storytelling delivery method. Story was told through gameplay – as it should be.

We didn't need cutscenes in *Jet Set Willy*. *Elite*'s story was all in your head (providing you didn't bother reading the accompanying novella). Even a game with one foot in literature such as, say, the groundbreaking adventure *The Hobbit*, didn't swamp the player with reams of text.

And then at some point, it was seemed we needed everything spelled out to us, and we had to stop enjoying games as games. It was felt that the only way the world would take us seriously was if games looked like movies. Or maybe developers want some of the glamour, which comes with making films.

Which is, essentially, a very long-winded way of saying… thank heck for *Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* – which sticks two fingers up to the prevailing trends, and revels in its sheer, old school, videogameyness.

And – yes – that is a real word. You don't need to bother looking it up. *



> "Games have never been more cinematic than they are now – and that isn't a compliment"

What do you think?

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at: RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag darran.jones@futurenet.com

Mikado Game Center

We talk with Rak and Jonio, employees of this famous Japanese retro arcade









» It's been years since we've played on *Power Drift*!



» Strap on in for a full-motion journey through the fantasy zone that you won't soon forget!

Arcades aren't an uncommon sight in central Tokyo, but encountering arcades like Mikado Game Center in the Takadanobaba district anywhere on Earth is a rarity. Mikado is well-known for several reasons: it has a vibrant scene devoted to the fighting game *Guilty Gear Xrd*, it supports numerous other communities for competitive games, large and small, and it has a jaw-dropping collection of retro machines in excellent condition: you can play *Starblade* or *Darius* on its original cabinet, followed up with a round of *Fighters History Dynamite* or *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*. If you really want a rare experience, you can ride one of the few remaining full-motion *Space Harrier* setups!



» Behind these doors lies an amazing retro arcade beyond your wildest dreams.

The selection and curation of the machines at Mikado is top-notch, and thanks to the attentive efforts of its staff, it's become world-famous as a haven for competitive retro gaming. Whether it's *Final Fight Revenge*, *Buriki One*, or bizarre variants like one-second-long matches of *Galaxy Fight*, Mikado offers some of the most interesting game tournaments you'll see anywhere.

We spoke with 'Rak' and 'Jonio', two employees of Mikado who work to support the events and competitive scenes that the arcade hosts. We talked with them about what earns this storied arcade a special place in the heart of many gamers.

Can you tell us some of the history behind Mikado?

Rak: Mikado was originally a Sega-owned arcade based in Shinjuku. I'm not sure how long that was around originally, but in 2006 the current management took it over. In 2009, we moved from Shinjuku to Takadanobaba.

How do you feel Mikado supports Japan's arcade gaming culture?

Jonio: I think the events we hold are the most important thing. I mostly manage our *Guilty Gear* events, but all of our events are run with love and care. Rak and our bosses primarily coordinate the retro game events, catered to their particular area of expertise. I think it's one of Mikado's strong points.

What's the most popular game at Mikado?

Rak: Well, that would be *Guilty Gear*, for sure!

Hmmm, okay, well… what's the second most popular game then?

Rak: Well… hm, I'd say that *Gradius III* gets played quite a bit.

You hold a lot of tournaments of for obscure competitive games here. What's the most interesting tournament you've run?

Rak: If we take into account more than just fighting games, like, say, competitive fighting games… I'd say it'd be something like *Tokimeki Memorial Taisen Puzzle Dama* [an uncommonly-seen spinoff of Konami's *Taisen Puzzle Dama* arcade game with characters from *Tokimeki Memorial* – Ed].

Japanese arcades are in a tough spot these days. Mobile gaming is on the rise, and arcades must increasingly rely on big, expensive machines to attempt to bring in consumers. It's difficult for any arcade to get by, much less one with a focus on smaller retro games. How does Mikado manage to weather the storm?

Rak: A successful game centre does more than just operate machines – it provides services and events for its customers. I feel like that's how Mikado keeps on going. We offer a variety of events and tournaments for our clientele to enjoy. *


CONSTRUCTOR
CONSTRUCTION MEETS CORRUPTION
RETURN OF THE CULT CITY BUILDING GAME
SYSTEM•3



BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

MARCH 2000 – The bestselling console of all time makes its debut, a PC gaming hit underwhelms the press and Squaresoft announces two sequels to a game it hasn't even made yet. Nick Thorpe jumps into his TARDIS…





NEWS MARCH 2000

10 March saw the NASDAQ stock index close at an all-time high of 5,048, marking the peak of the dotcom bubble. For the past five years, tech companies were able to inflate their market values based on the promise of future profits and a general growth in the sector, and the market expanded rapidly based on the philosophy that it was more important to grow a customer base than turn profits in the early years of the internet. However, many companies failed to generate any real profit, while others were found to be engaging in fraudulent accounting. In the coming months, companies would fold and lose huge chunks of their value – at one point, Amazon's share price fell from $107 to $7.

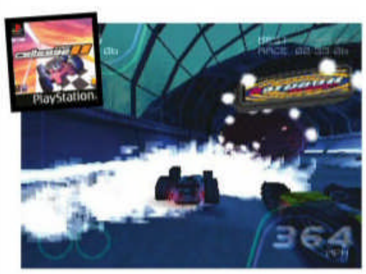
On 26 March, Russia elected Vladimir Putin as president. The former KGB officer was not tipped to last long when elected as prime minister but he quickly built a strong profile based on a tough approach to law and order. He had also been acting president since the resignation of Boris Yeltsin, whose decision to step aside was seen as an endorsement of Putin as a candidate. Putin has since maintained a tight grip on power in Russia, where he is currently in his third term as president – although he did serve a second term as prime minister in 2008, when he was constitutionally barred from running for the presidency.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM MARCH 2000

The first console of the new millennium arrived this month, as the hotly-anticipated PlayStation 2 launched in Japan with a selection of ten games. Namco's *Ridge Racer V* was the clear highlight of a relatively weak launch lineup, with other notable games including the underwhelming *Street Fighter EX3*, the historical strategy game *Kessen* and the music games *Stepping Selection* and *DrumMania*. That didn't hurt the machine with the public, though – the machine flew off the shelves thanks to its status as both a cutting-edge console and an affordable DVD player, selling 1.4 million units before March was over.

That wasn't the only big news from Japan, either. Having successfully turned its *Final Fantasy* franchise into a worldwide phenomenon over the previous three years, the famed RPG developer Squaresoft made an astonishing triple announcement, unveiling three new games in the series. *Final Fantasy IX* was to be a farewell to the original PlayStation, which celebrated the history of the RPG series by returning to classic character designs over the realistic humans of *Final Fantasy VIII*. *Final Fantasy X* would mark the series' debut on the PlayStation 2, carrying on the trend for realistic character designs while adding new features including real-time 3D environments and voice acting. *Final Fantasy XI* was still a couple of years away, but was set to be the first ever online-enabled *Final Fantasy* RPG, and would launch for PC and PlayStation 2.

Back home, the biggest names in arcade gaming gathered together in Earl's Court for the ATEI show, and the UK press was there to bring you all the latest. *Arcade* seemed worried about the health of the market, noting the shrinking power gap between consoles and arcades and the waning fortunes of Sega and Namco's flagship London locations. Remarking that the show offered "the smallest and oddest range of new coin-ups seen for years", the magazine was bewildered by *Dancing Stage Euromix* ("are the British just too reserved?"), *Emergency Call Ambulance* ("a disturbing sense of dread and responsibility") and the world-shatteringly excellent *Power Shovel* ("too mundane to contemplate").



[PlayStation] Don't blink – *Rollcage Stage II* is blisteringly fast and action-packed.



[Arcade] Could arcades survive with quirky games like Taito's *Power Shovel* on the way?

THIS MONTH IN…



Arcade

This month's group test saw four car mechanics gathered together to play a selection of top racing games, including *Crazy Taxi*, *Gran Turismo 2* and *Speed Freaks*. We learn that, "If you don't have the right exhaust on the car, it'll make a lot of noise but it won't increase the performance." Okay then.



Dreamcast Magazine

The best letters page quote of the month goes to Simon Hopes, who wrote the following words: "You don't see people who were loyal to the C64 and Spectrum still harping on about how brilliant they are." Well Simon, we know quite a few people who would beg to differ on that particular point…



Computer & Video Games

This month, the team split a £250 budget for retro games five ways and ended up with eight consoles and 98 games. The top £50 buy was a SNES with ten games including *Yoshi's Island* and *Zelda: A Link To The Past*, but a Saturn with *Burning Rangers* ran it close.



[PS2] The shining jewel in the crown of the Japanese launch lineup was this great arcade racer.



[PlayStation] *Final Fantasy IX*'s announcement was rather overshadowed by the reveal of *Final Fantasy X* and *XI*…

Then again, the coverage also referred to Capcom's *Strider Hiryu 2* as "abominable" so perhaps we shouldn't put too much stock in it.

The biggest new launch of the month was *The Sims*, a life simulation game by *SimCity* developer Maxis. Reviewers weren't exactly bursting with enthusiasm for the game, though – in a 7/10 review, *Edge* remarked that *The Sims* was "undoubtedly one of the freshest experiences available on any platform" but complained of limited long-term appeal, noting that "the toys run out sooner than you'd expect." *Arcade*'s 3/5 review wasn't thrilled with the open-ended gameplay, remarking that "you get no feeling of accomplishment or satisfaction from the game" but conceding the appeal of "the soap opera feel, the voyeuristic pleasure of spying on these folk". The public was much more receptive to the game, which just kept selling – some 16 million copies were shipped over the next five years, knocking off *Myst* to become the bestselling PC game of all time. Oh, and there were seven expansion packs too.

PlayStation owners were treated to a futuristic racing sequel in the form of *Rollcage Stage II*, which received 9/10 from the *Official PlayStation Magazine* and 8/10 from *Edge*. *Arcade* declared it the PlayStation game of the month, with our own Paul Rose saying it "deserves to sell by the truckload" and "would hopefully represent a breakthrough for the series". Also arriving this month was the Dream Factory/Squaresoft fighter *Ehrgeiz*, which boasted true 3D environments as well as the inclusion of *Final Fantasy VII*'s Cloud, Tifa and Sephiroth as playable fighters. *Computer & Video Games* was impressed, awarding 4/5 and commending it for its quest mode, minigames and general size.

On other formats, the N64 conversion of the excellent arcade racer *Hydro Thunder* was making waves, earning 4/5 from *Arcade* and 84% from *N64 Magazine*, which described it as, "San Francisco Rush on water but much, much better than that sounds." It was surely better than *ECW Hardcore Revolution*, Acclaim's latest grappling game. The game combined the engine from *WWF Attitude* with the stars of the Philadelphia-based extreme wrestling promotion, including Rob Van Dam, Tommy Dreamer and Mike Awesome, and was nowhere close to competing games like *WWF Wrestlemania 2000*. Dreamcast owners had a relatively quiet month, having to make do with good ports of the likes of *Rayman 2* and *Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver*.



[PS2] It was still a long way off, but the announcement of *Final Fantasy X* certainly excited fans of the series.

Finally, after months of watching the Neo-Geo Pocket Color amass a range of excellent fighting games, Game Boy Color owners finally got one of their own in the form of *Street Fighter Alpha*. Crawfish Interactive adapted the five-year-old arcade game superbly, despite having to cram a six-button control scheme into a two-button system, even managing to squeeze in all the backgrounds and the three secret characters. A 4/5 review in *Arcade* could only find fault with the lack of a link-up versus mode, which it described as "an omission of almost criminal proportions". Time would tell how SNK would respond to that, but it's safe to say that a boatload more fighting games might be on the cards… *

CHARTS

MARCH 2000

NINTENDO 64



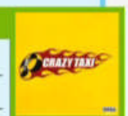
1. Resident Evil 2 (Virgin)
2. Vigilante 8 (Activision)
3. Toy Story 2 (Activision)
4. Super Mario 64 (Nintendo)
5. F-Zero X (Nintendo)

PLAYSTATION



1. Gran Turismo 2 (Sony)
2. FIFA 2000 (Electronic Arts)
3. Medal Of Honor (Electronic Arts)
4. Tomorrow Never Dies (Electronic Arts)
5. Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation (Eidos)

DREAMCAST



1. Crazy Taxi (Sega)
2. Virtua Striker 2 (Sega)
3. Sega Worldwide Soccer 2000 (Sega)
4. Zombie Revenge (Sega)
5. SoulCalibur (Sega)

MUSIC



1. Bag It Up (Geri Halliwell)
2. All The Small Things (Blink 182)
3. Don't Give Up (Chicane ft. Bryan Adams)
4. Killer (ATB)
5. American Pie (Madonna)


YOU ARE IN AN ENTRY
EAST, WEST AND SOUT
UP
ENT

Mystery House

"THE GAME'S UP, SCARLET. THERE ARE NO MORE BULLETS LEFT IN THAT GUN"

#112

» ON-LINE SYSTEMS » APPLE II » 1980

Almost every PC gamer knows Sierra (or, as it used to go by, On-Line Systems) is famous for its cutting-edge adventure games from the Eighties and Nineties. Not everybody realizes that Sierra's roots actually began on the Apple II and its seven high-res adventures, though. After founders Ken and Roberta Williams discovered a game called *Colossal Cave Adventure*, they discussed plans for their first 'whodunit' adventure, *Mystery House*.

The game has a whodunit theme. The player stands outside an abandoned Victorian house. Once they enter, they are greeted by seven people. Here, before the game begins, you are told who each of the characters are, what their occupation is, and – although completely irrelevant to this game – what colour their hair is. These occupants are murdered one by one, and it is your job to find the killer before you become the next victim.

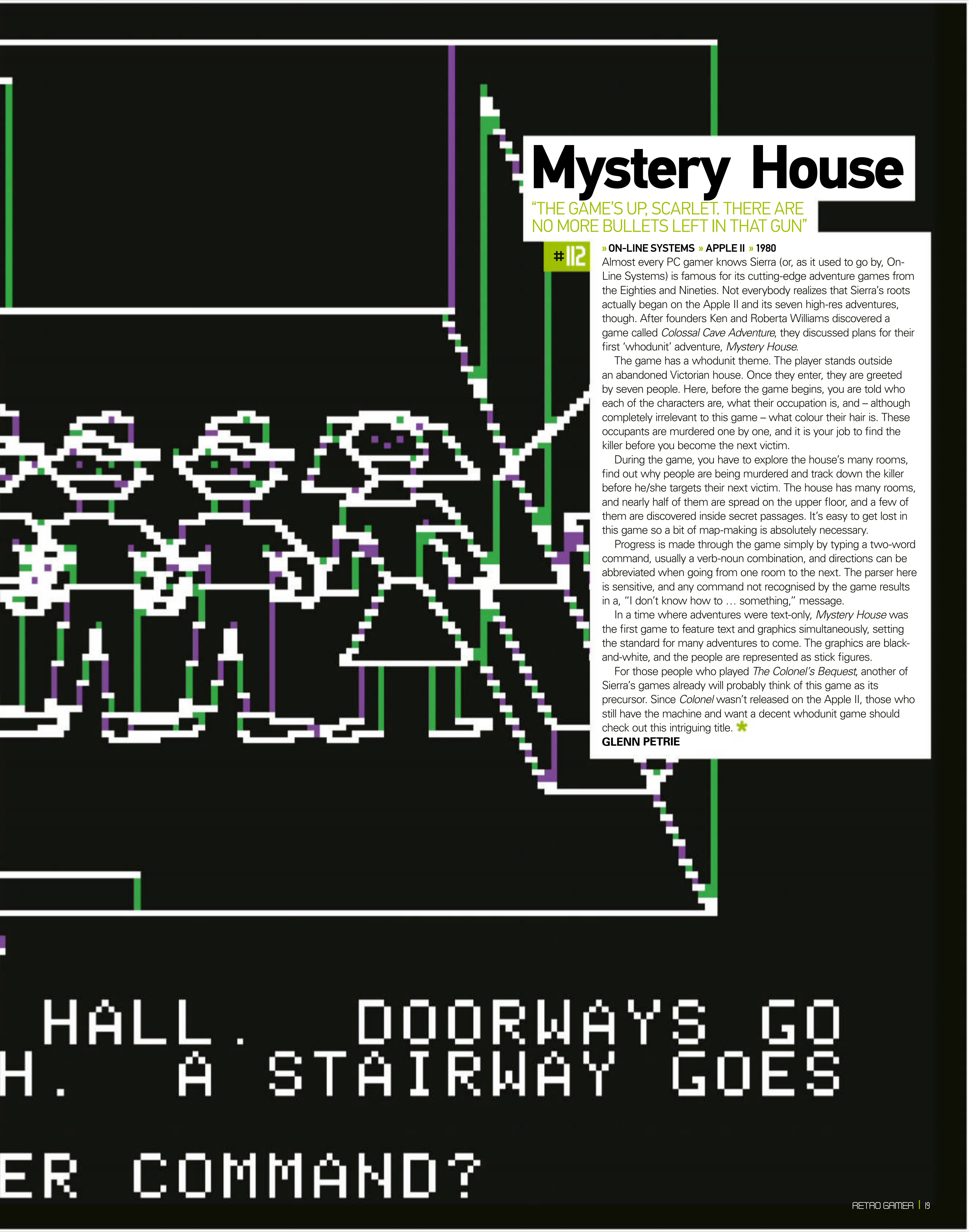
During the game, you have to explore the house's many rooms, find out why people are being murdered and track down the killer before he/she targets their next victim. The house has many rooms, and nearly half of them are spread on the upper floor, and a few of them are discovered inside secret passages. It's easy to get lost in this game so a bit of map-making is absolutely necessary.

Progress is made through the game simply by typing a two-word command, usually a verb-noun combination, and directions can be abbreviated when going from one room to the next. The parser here is sensitive, and any command not recognised by the game results in a, "I don't know how to … something," message.

In a time where adventures were text-only, *Mystery House* was the first game to feature text and graphics simultaneously, setting the standard for many adventures to come. The graphics are black-and-white, and the people are represented as stick figures.

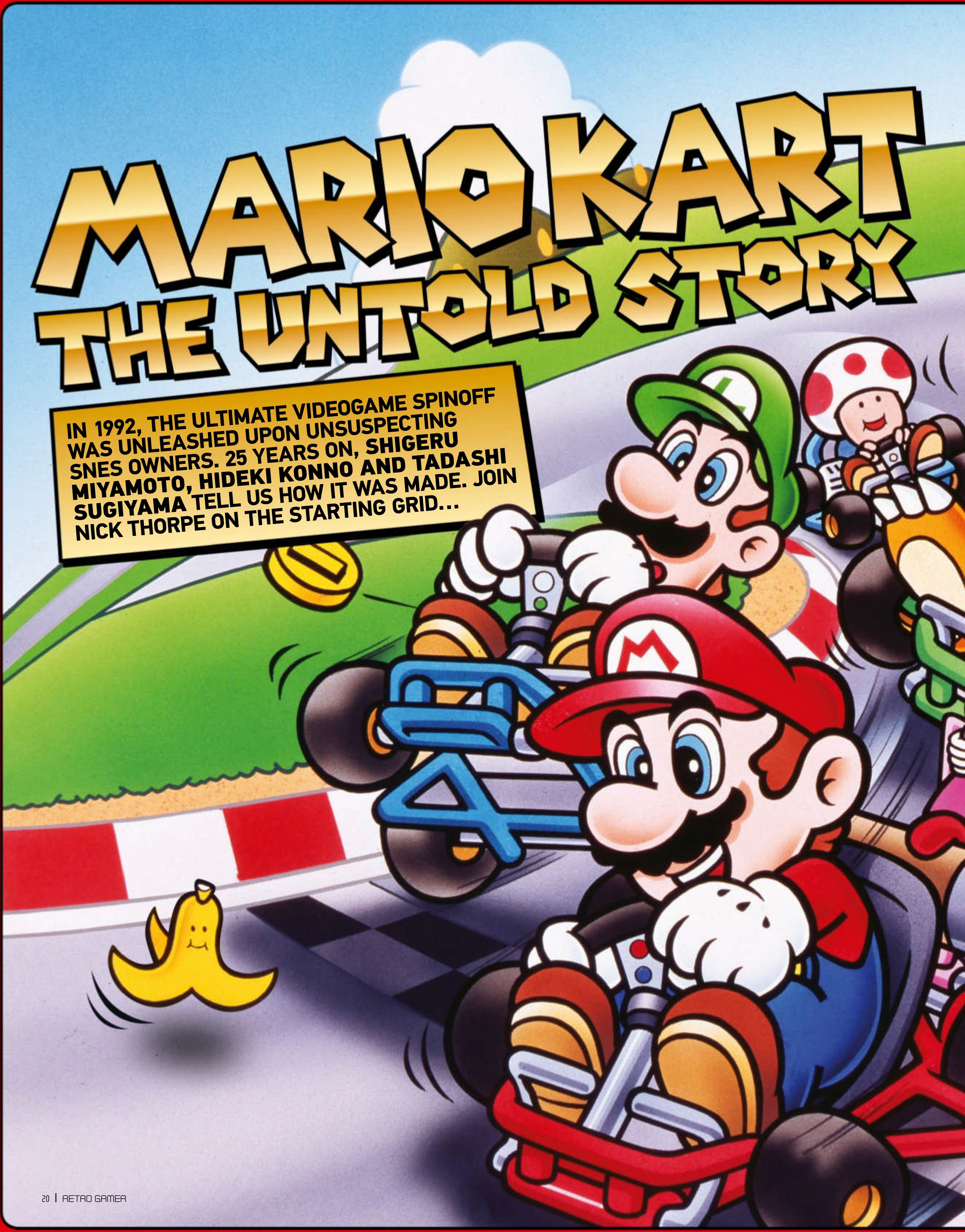
For those people who played *The Colonel's Bequest*, another of Sierra's games already will probably think of this game as its precursor. Since *Colonel* wasn't released on the Apple II, those who still have the machine and want a decent whodunit game should check out this intriguing title. *

GLENN PETRIE



MARIO KART
THE UNTOLD STORY

IN 1992, THE ULTIMATE VIDEOGAME SPINOFF WAS UNLEASHED UPON UNSUSPECTING SNES OWNERS. 25 YEARS ON, SHIGERU MIYAMOTO, HIDEKI KONNO AND TADASHI SUGIYAMA TELL US HOW IT WAS MADE. JOIN NICK THORPE ON THE STARTING GRID...







KARTING KINGS

The Nintendo all-stars that we spoke to about Super Mario Kart



SHIGERU MIYAMOTO
PRODUCER, *SUPER MARIO KART*



HIDEKI KONNO
DIRECTOR, *SUPER MARIO KART*



TADASHI SUGIYAMA
DIRECTOR, *SUPER MARIO KART*

MARIO KART





» The Super Famcom and SNES art were marginally different from each other.

Videogame spinoffs are a tricky thing to get right. Often, it seems like someone in marketing has asked the question, "Why don't we take [Property X] and make a [Genre Y] game out of it?" and then left the developers to solve the problem. Sometimes, the idea is sound but hampered by trying to adhere too closely to the original game's mechanics. On other occasions, the spirit of the original property is lost in the transition to a new genre, or the developer has wandered too far from what it does best and delivered a sub-par product. But the world's most beloved spinoff series didn't have any of these problems, because Nintendo EAD never started off with the goal of making *Super Mario Kart*.

"Our original plan didn't include Mario or karts. The game's roots lie in one of the launch titles for the SNES: *F-Zero*," director Hideki Konno and graphics artist Tadashi Sugiyama confirm to us. The futuristic racing game was a key technical showcase for the SNES, displaying the scaling and rotation capabilities of the console's custom graphics hardware – a feature commonly known as Mode 7. It was an influential and popular game, but one that lacked multiplayer. "The game was designed for single-player gameplay



» [SNES] Hazards on the track aren't limited to those provided by other racers, as the Thwomp here proves.

> "I had absolutely no objections with enemy characters racing against rivals"
> Shigeru Miyamoto

because of our focus on getting across the sense of speed and the size of the courses," explain Konno and Sugiyama. "It was a prototype for a multiplayer version of *F-Zero* that ended up being the starting point for *Super Mario Kart*, and from there we went through a period of trial and error to find what worked."

"You could say that Mario was added to the racing game as a result of this trial and error," Konno and Sugiyama continue. "*F-Zero* displays the layer for the course over an area of 100 screens in order to create a feeling of speed and scale. However, because of hardware limitations, splitting the screen for multiplayer required the courses be displayed within an area no more than four TV screens wide by four screens high, i.e. 16 screens." Getting multiplayer working was possible, albeit with some sacrifice – and, as it turns out, losing a huge chunk of the map was a sacrifice too far. "We tried creating an *F-Zero*-style circuit within that limitation, but found it too difficult to race in with an F1-type vehicle, making it impossible to create a course that could give you a feeling of speed."

Given that high speeds were a key characteristic of *F-Zero*, it was clear that the game's theme needed to change. "In a last-ditch attempt, we came up with what we felt was our only choice: kart racing. Karts were a great fit for these compact courses," Konno and Sugiyama recall. The slower pace of the game certainly suited the smaller courses, although the development team would have to be inventive with their 1024x1024 pixel design space. "However, with the drivers wearing helmets and racing suits, they all

STARTING GRID

Your guide to the eight racers found in Super Mario Kart

MARIO

SPECIAL ITEM: RIVAL:

ACCELERATION ★★☆☆
TOP SPEED ★★★☆
WEIGHT ★★☆☆
HANDLING ★★☆☆



PEACH

SPECIAL ITEM: RIVAL:

ACCELERATION ★★★★
TOP SPEED ★★☆☆
WEIGHT ★★☆☆
HANDLING ★☆☆☆





LUIGI

SPECIAL ITEM: RIVAL:

ACCELERATION ★★☆☆
TOP SPEED ★★★☆
WEIGHT ★★☆☆
HANDLING ★★☆☆



TOAD

SPECIAL ITEM: RIVAL:

ACCELERATION ★★★☆
TOP SPEED ★☆☆☆
WEIGHT ★☆☆☆
HANDLING ★★★☆





» [SNES] Koopa throws caution to the wind and attempts the cross this precarious shortcut.



» [SNES] Racers can be squashed flat if they've been shrunk, just like poor Toad here.



looked the same from behind and lacked individuality. It's hard to tell who is who, so we ran into another problem there."

The resolution to this problem proved surprisingly simple, and provided the game with some serious star power to rely upon. "We thought about what kind of character would be instantly recognisable when seen from behind, and decided to try Mario. Mario certainly is a recognisable character, even from behind, and it was instantly clear that it's him," explain Konno and Sugiyama. "For the other racers, we chose more characters from the *Mario* franchise who could also be clearly recognised from behind. This was the first step in the creation of *Super Mario Kart*. Without this hardware limitation we might have ended up with a different racing game."

Eight characters were chosen as racers. Mario and Luigi were obvious choices, as were Princess Peach, Toad and Yoshi. However, the appearance of the antagonistic characters Donkey Kong Jr., Koopa Trooper and Bowser in a friendly competitive setting was a tad unexpected. We had to ask if there was ever a concern about that."Well the genre of the games are different and all the characters from the *Mario* series are essentially competing individually in the races, so I didn't find it strange, even if they are normally opponents," says Konno. "Here they are more like friendly rivals." Mario's character designer Shigeru Miyamoto, who served as producer on *Super Mario Kart*, elaborates on this: "The setting for *Mario* is in any case like a comic, where in each story the characters appear in different roles. Mario appearing in lots of different kinds of games is also in line with comic tradition. With this in mind, I had absolutely no objections with enemy characters racing against rivals or characters that you can control yourself." Sugiyama also chimes in on this point to add his take: "Also, despite being villains, as you say, it's still hard to actually hate these characters and I think it was a good point that users could happily use any of the characters."

With the characters established, the courses they were to race on had to be created within the tight space restrictions. "Due to the hardware limitations at the time, we couldn't place actual 3D objects," says Sugiyama. "So we divided the ground into different types: asphalt, dirt, wood, stone, and water and created differences between them by changing the values for their resistance." A great deal of variance was achieved using this approach – nobody would mistake Vanilla Lake's ice for the mud of Choco Island, for example. "For the backgrounds we picked things that fit with the *Mario* setting," he continues. "The course difficulties were adjusted as we played them, and things like the breakable barriers were added later to make the game more thrilling."

Had Nintendo been content to put out a simple two-player racing game featuring *Mario* characters ▶

BOWSER

SPECIAL ITEM: RIVAL:

ACCELERATION ★☆☆☆
TOP SPEED ★★★★
WEIGHT ★★★☆
HANDLING ★★☆☆



YOSHI

SPECIAL ITEM: RIVAL:

ACCELERATION ★★★★
TOP SPEED ★★☆☆
WEIGHT ★★☆☆
HANDLING ★☆☆☆



KOOPA TROOPER

SPECIAL ITEM: RIVAL:

ACCELERATION ★★★☆
TOP SPEED ★☆☆☆
WEIGHT ★☆☆☆
HANDLING ★★★☆



DONKEY KONG JR.

SPECIAL ITEM: RIVAL:

ACCELERATION ★☆☆☆
TOP SPEED ★★★★
WEIGHT ★★★☆
HANDLING ★★☆☆



MARIO KART

TEAM PICKS

Everyone's got a favourite track in Super Mario Kart – here are the ones we particularly like…





DARRAN
RAINBOW ROAD

■ This track felt like a loving homage to the racers I used to play in my local arcade. It's certainly not the easiest of tracks and I was never amazing at it, but the feeling you get when you complete the course without falling off is mighty sweet.



NICK
DONUT PLAINS 3

■ With a little bit of practice, this course will let you unleash your inner scumbag – which is exactly why I love it. Mastery of mushrooms will allow you to hop over the walls, making for huge sneaky shortcuts that will keep you ahead of the pack.







DREW
BOWSER'S CASTLE 2

■ I always felt a degree of trepidation when navigating Bowser's Castle. Maybe it was the Thwomps, and the fact that this was the course that me and my brother would always use in our furious head-to-heads. It's a true test of your karting mettle.



SAM
KOOPA BEACH 1

■ I was going to come boldly marching in with Battle Course 1 but unfortunately that parade was briskly cancelled due to rain – courtesy of Darran. I guess I'll go speeding through the shimmering, shallow waters of Koopa Beach while I throw a strop. Hmph.









▶ and courses, that product might have been considered good or even great. Once the decision was made to move away from straight racing, though, the team just kept going by adding more elements from the *Mario* platform games. For a start, collectable coins were placed on the course, which would speed up your kart. "This was an idea to add depth to the game. I remember that our boss, Mr Miyamoto, was rather focused on this," says Konno, and it's a point that Miyamoto confirms. "This is a feature that wouldn't be possible in a normal racing game. It seemed like it would be fun to actually place them on the course," he recalls. "I remember that we also made it so you could jump because this was a feature that couldn't be missing from a *Mario* game.

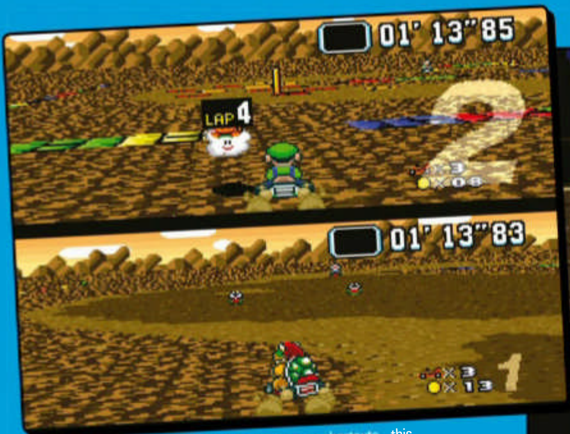
However, the game's defining feature would be the addition of power-up items, which could not only enhance your regular racing attributes such as speed, but also be used to attack other players. "When we decided that we would be making *Mario Kart* as a racing game, I thought that we shouldn't make a normal car-racing game, but instead create something based around the fun of competing for position, using karts as the medium," says Miyamoto. "It was a natural development that we would use items so that players who aren't as good could still have a chance to win, or that players who were behind could have something to give them a helping hand."

"The first item we made in the prototype was oil, which became the Banana," Konno and Sugiyama add. "We created items making sure they would fit with the *Mario* setting. In order to add offensive, defensive and unique elements to the gameplay while making sure these remained balanced, we added items with a *Mario*-esque design, such as Shells for attacking, Stars for invincibility and Ghosts for stealing other items, all while still prioritising the game processing." Nine items were created in total, each



» [SNES] The map on the bottom half of the screen never lets you forget how close your opposition was…





» [SNES] You'll need to be observant to spot some shortcuts – this barrier gap is practically invisible from afar.



» [SNES] Getting hit won't just slow you down, it'll cause you to lose coins, lowering your top speed.



thematically in tune with the *Mario* setting – a feature that rival karting games with less well-developed settings would seek to imitate in the future, usually to less success.

The effect of adding items to the game was completely transformative. "Attacking and defending with the items in the game is probably the feature most associated with *Mario Kart*," say Konno and Sugiyama. Our memories of hundreds of Shell attacks and carelessly-hit Banana peels, along with the inevitable rage brought about by such incidents, prove that point perfectly. "Before this game was completed we went through thousands of tests to balance the items. It was really exciting during the test plays when we would win or lose thanks to the effects of the items," he adds with a laugh.

In fact, if you've ever had a strong reaction to *Mario Kart*, it's likely that the development team has shared it. "I really played the game a lot during the adjustment and debug phases of the development. Because of the strong competitive gameplay, once I started test playing I would get excited and start shouting out while I played," Konno elaborates. "I just couldn't help it because of the randomness and potential for making huge comebacks. It's frustrating to lose even if it's just part of debugging, so I would keep playing… I mean test playing over and over," he laughs. "I may have been a bit distracting for the development teams working on other projects."

That potential for huge comebacks wasn't added by chance, either. "I'm not very good at racing games so, to give me a chance to win, I adjusted the item chances so that you'd get more powerful items the further back in the pack you were," confirms

"Once I started test playing I would get excited and start shouting out while I played"
Hideki Konno

Sugiyama. "Because of this, even I could make more sudden-comeback victories, meaning I could play against even the skilled players." This proved to be a huge boost to the longevity of the game – multiplayer gameplay was made friendly to newcomers, as although there was a definite gap between the performance of the best and worst players, there was no guarantee that superior course knowledge and racing chops would result in victory every time. Everyone from your little brother to your grandma could play it and have a half-decent shot at victory.

Of course, if they didn't win races, there was also a Battle Mode to allow them to take out their frustrations on you. "Battle Mode was an idea that came up while we were making the racing mode. It wasn't part of the original plan," say Konno and Sugiyama. "The competitive gameplay has strong shooter elements, and as we were experimenting with lots of different things, we found this fun to play, and better than we expected, so we decided to include it," explain the developers. "I wanted to create it as a game that works properly with two players. These players could then battle against each other just like in *Mario Bros.*," adds Miyamoto, referring to the original 1983 arcade game.

Everything made sense in multiplayer, but the single-player experience exhibited a couple of oddities. The first was that even the single-player racing employs the same split-screen view of the action as the multiplayer mode. "The core of this game is the two-player multiplayer split-screen mode which we managed to achieve," explain Konno and Sugiyama. "We developed the game so that it could make use of a complete two-player competitive game system. The full map and rear-view mirror in the bottom half of the screen in single player were also extensions of that system. These features were achieved using camera angles and scaling adjustments. You could say it's the result of using the features efficiently."

The other oddity was in the use of items. While your racer would receive random items, CPU-controlled racers would only ever use their own fixed items, some of which were unavailable to players. "We



» [SNES] Without being able to use 3D objects, Nintendo had to get creative with jumps to pull off crossover tracks.


» [SNES] Peach takes out Toad with a well-timed Red Shell, but he's got one of his own in stock…

HIT STOP

Mario Kart, and kart racers in general, just wouldn't be the same without the ability to attack your fellow racers or close the gap with a boost. We take a look at the items that were on offer in 1992…



MUSHROOM

■ This item gives you a brief burst of speed, and is commonly handed out to racers that are falling behind the pack. Use it to cover rough terrain for a handy shortcut!

STAR

■ If you're struggling to keep up, you may receive this rare item. It both temporarily boosts your speed and enables you to attack other racers by ramming them.





FEATHER

■ Using the feather will allow for a super high jump that creates major shortcut opportunities. These are most commonly found in the Ghost Valley circuits.

BANANA PEEL

■ This defensive item is commonly dished out to the frontrunners, and can be thrown forwards or backwards. If another racer hits it, they'll spin out immediately!



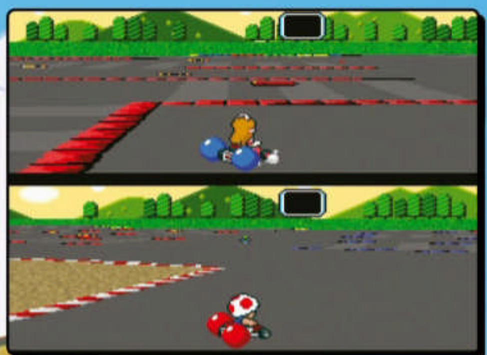






▶ wanted to give each character some personality. By giving the CPU racers some individuality it adds something special to the single-player mode, expanding the gameplay and making it more fun," explains Konno. "At the same time, with the hardware limitations and technical abilities of the time, it was difficult to implement the kind of logic that would allow CPU racers to use items well," he continues. "So we racked our brains about how we could make the game fun, and this was the result. In later titles we made it so that the CPU racers could also use the normal items properly throughout the game."

When *Super Mario Kart* was finished in 1992, the development team was pleased with having come up with a creative solution to a hard technical limitation. "Looking from the perspective of how to create *F-Zero*-style gameplay within such a small area, it seemed a huge challenge from both a planning and technical sense," says Konno. "We were able to overcome the technical problem by using karts. Instead of thinking conservatively and continuing to struggle with the problems, we came to a positive outcome by dramatically changing the gameplay." Despite this, the team had no idea of the success that it would go



> **"We were also playing the game as we were making it, so I knew it was fun"**
> Tadashi Sugiyama

on to achieve. "We were also playing the game as we were making it, so I knew it was fun, but I didn't imagine that users would actually like it that much," says Sugiyama.

Like it they did, though – in a 92% review in *Nintendo Magazine System*, Jaz Rignall noted the two-player racer as "fast, furious and highly addictive racing action – the best yet seen on the SNES". *N-Force* awarded it 88%, with Nick Roberts noting that "with a few mates the game bursts into life", while *Super Play* offered 94%, calling battle mode "simply the best two-player game ever". In America, reviewers were similarly taken with the game. *GamePro* offered it a full 5/5 Fun Factor rating, while the four reviewers from *Electronic Gaming Monthly* offered it two 9/10 and two 8/10 scores, calling it "the best driving game to come along for some time".

Players took notice of this praise and picked up the game in their droves, with more players catching onto the game through playing with friends. The game eventually sold a massive 8.76 million copies, placing it behind only *Super Mario World* and *Donkey Kong Country* as the third-highest-selling SNES game as all time, comfortably ahead of the fourth-placed *Street Fighter II* by over 2 million copies. Despite being so common, demand for *Super Mario Kart* is still very high today amongst SNES collectors – you'll be lucky to find a loose PAL cartridge on eBay for less than £20, and boxed copies naturally sell for more.

When asked why he thinks *Super Mario Kart* was so successful, Konno is quick to point to the multiplayer appeal of the game. "I think maybe lots of people played it as a kind of 'competitive communication





GREEN SHELL

■ Once fired, this projectile weapon will continue in a straight path until it hits a wall, at which point it'll rebound off. It's a key item for experienced racers with deadly aim.

RED SHELL

■ Hitting a wall will stop your Red Shell, but if you fired it at the right time it won't do that, because Red Shells home in on nearby racers for a deadly strike.





BOO

■ Using the Boo will give you a ghostly countenance, turning you invisible and allowing you to pass through other racers – but stealing your opponent's item is the best bit.

COIN

■ Pulling the trigger on this item will give you a couple of coins, boosting your top speed for as long as you happen to hold on to them and giving you an edge on your competitors.





LIGHTNING

■ This exceptionally uncommon item causes huge commotion, shrinking enemy racers except for the user. From there, they're slow and easy to squash with your wheels.



» [SNES] The reward for a well-earned victory is a trophy and a bottle of… what do Koopas drink?



» [SNES] Sliding around corners is a key skill for any *Super Mario Kart* player to master.

tool' – a way to connect with others though multiplayer – back before network multiplayer was popular, and got really into the game, playing it over a long time, including the parts like time trials that can be played over and over."

While other companies might have been tempted to cash in on the success of *Super Mario Kart* with a quick sequel, Nintendo exhibited great restraint with the series – in part because the original game was already pushing the boundaries of what was possible on the SNES. The first sequel to the 16-bit original wasn't created until 1996, when *Mario Kart 64* could take advantage of new technology to radically alter track design. This sequel proved that the original was no one-hit wonder, and many more followed – although never more than one per hardware generation, ensuring that the series stays special. With eight main games having been made, the *Mario Kart* series stands at over 100 million sales.

With such a history of success behind the *Mario Kart* series, we're keen to know how Nintendo tries to maintain the legacy of the original when creating the sequels. For Sugiyama, there's one key ingredient. "*Mario Kart* is not *Mario Kart* without the items. The opportunities that come from using the items mean that both skilled and unskilled players can play this game together," he says. "A key characteristic of *Mario Kart* is how it's often the case that you can't win just with your driving skills alone, with the races being very close as everyone does everything they can to get over the finish line first." Although he hasn't been hands-on with the series since 2003's *Mario Kart: Double Dash!!*, it's clear to see that the designers of subsequent games agree with his philosophy of bringing players of disparate skill levels together.

"We aimed to create a game that's fun to play with family, friends, with everyone," concurs Konno, who has remained involved with the series right through to *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*. "We tried to design the game so everyone could enjoy the thrill of driving, and everyone could have a chance to win, but playing it a lot will still put you on top. The first *Mario Kart* title had split-screen multiplayer, and with Nintendo DS it became possible to play with eight players over wireless communication, and with people from across the world online. This is the most important element that's been carried over from the concepts of the original *Mario Kart* game." ▶



MARIO KART TIMELINE ATTACK

Here's how the legacy of Super Mario Kart unfolded over the 25 years since its launch…

MARIO KART 64

N64, 1996

■ The first sequel to *Super Mario Kart* used the N64's power to move the series into full 3D, allowing for more dynamic course designs. It also bumped the player count from two to four and introduced the dreaded Blue Shell.



MARIO KART SUPER CIRCUIT

GAME BOY ADVANCE, 2001

■ Like the SNES original, the first handheld *Mario Kart* used Mode-7-style flat, rotating tracks. It also included the SNES courses as unlockable extras, combining with the game's 20 brand-new tracks for a mammoth roster of 40.

MARIO KART: DOUBLE DASH!!

GAMECUBE, 2003

■ This experimental title required players to pick two racers which could be freely swapped during the race, and karts were also chosen separately. Special weapons for each racer were also included, for regular players as well as the CPU.



MARIO KART ARCADE GP

ARCADE, 2005

■ The first coin-op instalment in the series was developed by Namco and included Pac-Man as a special guest racer. A ridiculous 93 items are included, and for the first time since the original, on-track coins make their return.

MARIO KART DS

DS, 2005

■ The second handheld *Mario Kart* game was Nintendo's big step into the world of online gaming, offering friends the chance to play against one another without bundling onto a sofa together. The inclusion of retro tracks was also made into a permanent fixture here.



MARIO KART ARCADE GP 2

ARCADE, 2007

■ This is more of an update than a full-blown sequel, featuring the original game's content as well as new items, racers, tracks and a somewhat irritating colour commentator. Unlike the original, export models allowed players to use magnetic memory cards.

MARIO KART WII

WII, 2008

■ Races were bumped up to 12 participants here, with widened tracks to accommodate the added competition. For the first time, players could choose to use motorbikes instead of karts, and motion controls mimicking the use of a steering wheel were added.



MARIO KART 7

3DS, 2011

■ Codeveloped by Retro Studios and Nintendo EAD, this game returned coins to the main series after a lengthy absence, and added underwater and gliding sections. It was also possible to build your kart from three main components – body, wheels and glider.



MARIO KART ARCADE GP DX

ARCADE, 2013

■ This major overhaul of the *Mario Kart Arcade GP* series adds heavy modifications to existing track layouts, including the addition of underwater and gliding sections. It's also still being updated today, and can be found in Western arcades.





MARIO KART 8

WII U, 2014

■ The first *Mario Kart* of the HD era adds anti-gravity sections, allowing for impossible twists and loops. Bikes make their return and ATVs debut, while DLC adds representation for other Nintendo properties including *F-Zero*, *Zelda*, *Animal Crossing* and *Excitebike*.



MARIO KART 8 DELUXE

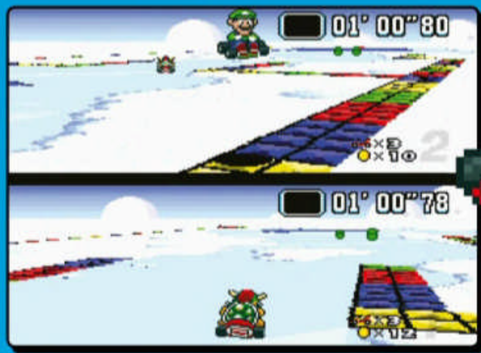
SWITCH, 2017

■ This enhanced version of *Mario Kart 8* includes all the Wii U version's DLC, a revamped Battle Mode with new courses including a *Splatoon*-themed arena, new characters and the ability to hold two items at once. Visuals are also upgraded to 1080p.

Super Mario Kart wasn't just critically and commercially popular, it was influential. The kart racing formula has been copied and cloned a hundred times over by all manner of competitors, from originals like *Speed Freak* to crossovers like *Konami Krazy Racers*, as well as mascot-centric games starring Pac-Man, Bomberman, Crash Bandicoot and inevitably Sonic. However, very few have ever come close to the heights of the *Mario Kart* series – it's hard to replicate the appeal of the Mushroom Kingdom, the precise balance of items that keeps each race open, and the refined handling model that underpins *Mario Kart*.

It can certainly be argued that the *Mario Kart* series is just as beloved as the overall franchise that spawned it. What's more, it's perhaps even more valuable to Nintendo from a financial perspective. The games sell in huge numbers, and in recent years these have even eclipsed those of the acclaimed platform games – *Mario Kart Wii* sold 36.83 million copies, almost three times as many as *Super Mario Galaxy* (no slouch, at 12.72 million), and *Mario Kart 8* was the bestselling Wii U game, beating the second-placed *New Super Mario Bros U* by over 2.5 million copies.

With all that in mind, it's no exaggeration to say that *Super Mario Kart* is the most important spinoff game of all time, and nothing else even comes close. How does this feel for the developers? "I'm extremely happy, and deeply grateful that *Mario Kart* has become the series it is today, and has continued to be loved by users for so long," says Sugiyama. "I think it's thanks to the efforts of the staff, who for each new instalment work to implement new ideas and make each game feel fresh so users don't get tired of them. I hope you'll continue to look forward to new *Mario Kart* games."

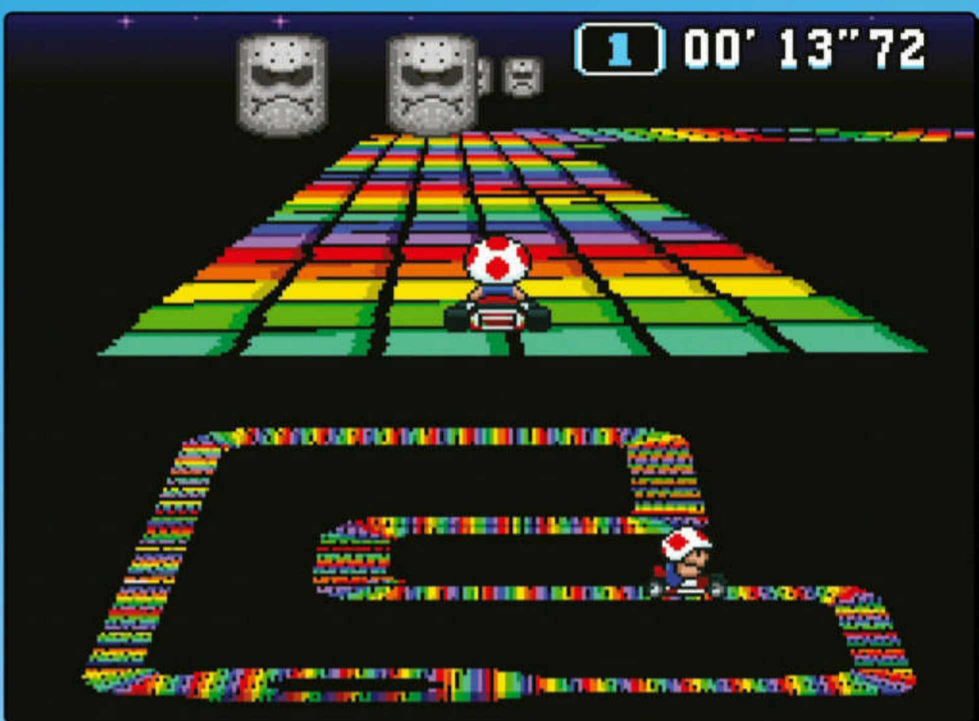


» [SNES] All sorts of corner-cutting shenanigans are possible with use of the feather.

"I'm extremely happy and proud that so many people have enjoyed the game and continue to play it for so long," says Konno. "*Mario Kart* became a series of its own, where you can glide through the sky or race underwater, and in the latest instalment you can even control gravity! I'm sure more unique experiences will keep being introduced to the *Mario Kart* series so users can continue playing for years to come."

We have no doubt that players will keep coming back – they've embraced *Mario Kart* as an evergreen series. It has managed to transcend the changing fashions of the last 25 years, not to mention the varying fortunes of Nintendo's consoles, because stealing first place with a red shell feels bloody brilliant. That simple truth means that *Super Mario Kart* and its successors will always have an audience. *

Special thanks to our interviewees for answering our questions, and to Kalpesh Tailor and Emma Bunce for making this article possible.



» [SNES] There's a reason Rainbow Road is the last track in the game, it's the most challenging one you'll face.



BATTLING BACK

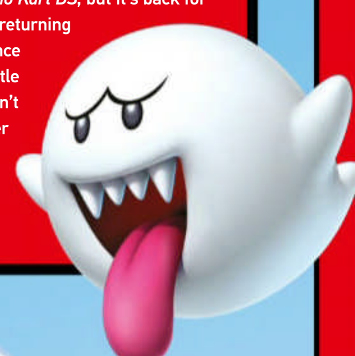
How Super Mario Kart is influencing Mario Kart 8 Deluxe on Switch


» [Switch] The DNA from the original *Super Mario Kart* is still clear in the franchise's most recent outing.

Sometimes, you don't know what you have until it's gone – and that's certainly true for many elements of the original *Super Mario Kart*, which have come and gone over the years. Character-specific items and collectable coins were both omitted from *Mario Kart 64* but later returned to the series, and *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* is bringing back more SNES-era features that have been missing as of late.

With the original Wii U version of *Mario Kart 8*, the biggest complaint that many had was the omission of the classic Battle Mode, a feature which originated on the SNES. Instead of being able to roam around specially-designed arenas that encouraged carnage and interaction, the game featured battles on regular racing tracks, a compromise which satisfied few. The good news is that SNES-style battling is back in *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*, and a variety of retro arenas are making their return along with it, including the SNES Battle Course 1.

That's not the only returning feature, either. While Bandai Namco's arcade games have featured the Boo as an item consistently, Nintendo's *Mario Kart* games haven't done so since *Mario Kart DS*, but it's back for *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*. Also returning is the feather, not seen since *Super Mario Kart*. This battle mode exclusive item doesn't just allow you to jump over enemy shells and banana skins – at close range it'll also let you steal another racer's balloons!





MAKING A SPLASH

FRO





GGER

"Remember Frogger? I used to be so into it. Getting that frog across the street used to be my life." So said Seinfeld's George Costanza, and it's a feeling many can relate to. Martyn Carroll looks back the iconic title from the Golden Age of arcades

***Frogger* is such a simple game. Four directions, one joystick, no fire button.** Your job is to guide five frogs to the safety of their homes on the other side of a busy road and hazardous river. When this is complete it starts over – only with slight variations that make the task trickier. Beyond this, the main reason for playing is to see how many 'loops' you can complete and how many points you can accrue while doing so.

For such a basic concept there are a surprising number of ways you can cark it. Nine, in fact. Getting squished under a vehicle is the obvious one, but you can also drown if you fail to secure a ride on a turtle's back or passing log and fall into the river. That's right, these frogs are of that very rare variety – thought by leading amphibian experts to only to exist in videogames – that die instantly on contact with water. More realistic hazards on later rounds include crocodiles, snakes and otters that all have a taste for defenceless, non-buoyant frog. You can also die by going off the screen to the left or right (the screen doesn't wrap around), jumping into a bay already occupied by a frog (or a sneaky croc), or missing a bay and hitting the riverbank. There's a time limit, too, adding pressure to the proceedings. In short, the game is filled with danger and the slightest misjudgement is punishable by death.

Yet, when *Frogger* was released in 1981 gamers were not deterred by constant peril and were instead drawn to its novel gameplay and cute, colourful graphics. The game quickly became an arcade smash and has been heralded as one of the coin-op greats alongside the likes of *Asteroids*, *Pac-Man*, *Centipede* and *Donkey Kong*. *Frogger* was developed by Konami – a company you may have heard of as they made videogames once upon a time – and published by Sega, and the game's worldwide success strengthened the coin-op credentials of both Japanese companies.

The game was also incredibly popular outside the arcades and there were countless releases for home systems. With its single, static screen and simple, sprite-based graphics *Frogger* was a good fit for the majority of computers and consoles of the day where memory and processing power was often limited. In fact, the original coin-op hardware was a basic Z80 set-up with an AY sound chip. Most of the early computer versions were unofficial, sporting titles like *Frog*, *Froggy*,

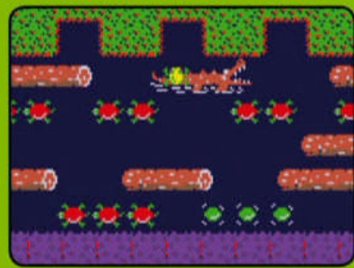
PLAY TO WIN

Some tips on how to play Frogger without croaking it every time



SPRING BACK

■ The nature of the game compels you to continually move up the screen, but often, especially when crossing the river, you should consider hopping backwards to avoid enemies and better position yourself to reach vacant bays.



CROC RIDE

■ From the second round onwards, crocodiles will often appear in place of logs. Don't worry, you can still jump on the croc's back and use it like a log, but avoid jumping on the head as this will result in loss of life.



NOW YOU'RE 'FOUR' IT

■ When crossing the road pay attention to the fourth lane of traffic in particular. The sporty cars here may suddenly speed up during a round, usually if you're taking too long to progress. It pays to keep your eye on this.

▶ *Frogrun, Hopper, Hoppit, Ribbit* – you name it. Many were just called *Frogger*! Sega did officially license the game, but the way licences were divvied up back then only served to muddy the waters further. The magnetic media, or rather tape/disk rights went to Sierra which released the game for every popular computer under the sun from the Apple II to the ZX81. Wisely, Sierra titled its versions *The Official Frogger* to distinguish them from the flood of unlicensed releases.

> **"I became pretty famous. Even now, many people I run into mention Frogger!"**
>
> Bob Pappas

Meanwhile Parker Brothers picked up the cartridge rights and produced carts for the Atari 2600, Atari 5200, Intellivision, ColecoVision, Atari 8-bit, VIC-20, Commodore 64 and TI-99/4A. Now some of these systems support both cartridges and magnetic media, which explains why there are separate Parker Brothers *and* Sierra versions of *Frogger* for the Commodore 64 and Atari 8-bit (plus the Atari 2600 when fitted with the Supercharger cassette expansion). Furthermore, Konami developed versions of the game for the MSX and the Tomy Tutor computers. A troupe of programmers was tasked with converting *Frogger* to home systems and among them was Bob Pappas. Bob had an existing relationship with Cornsoft, a US developer which sublicensed the magnetic media rights from Sierra to develop the game for Tandy and Timex computers.

"Cornsoft got the rights to *Frogger* and asked me to build it for the Tandy TRS-80," says Bob, who was still at high school at the time. "I had no specs, no source code at all. I had to drive eight miles into town from where I lived in the North Woods of Minnesota and play *Frogger* in the arcade. I'd then go home to program from memory." The TRS-80 was a fairly primitive machine with monochrome, low-resolution graphics, which presented Bob with further problems. "I started out trying to fit all of *Frogger* on the screen, but wasn't happy with the much-reduced pixel resolution. The game didn't look graphically rich at all so I decided to split the screen to have richer game sprites. I didn't want a hard transition from the road view to the river view so I put in a scrolling screen to preserve the 'feel' of the arcade game. I also had to add clipping to my sprite engine so the very slow processor wasn't busy painting and moving off-screen sprites."

Having finished the TRS-80 version, Bob was asked to port his code to the similar-specced Timex Sinclair 1000, which was the US version of the popular ZX81. "The graphics and processor were very similar," he says, "yet trying to do any work on the Timex itself was impossible due to the poor keyboard and screen. The most challenging part was to figure out how



SHE AIN'T HEAVY

■ If you spot a pink lady frog on a log, grab her and give her a piggyback to a bay. This will reward you with 200 bonus points. Snacking on a fly also awards 200 points. Take advantage of these bonuses to boost your score.



BEAR LEFT

■ The left-most bay is the most difficult to reach, so it's wise to fill that first. This is especially true after prolonged play, as on some rounds a speed transition may make it almost impossible to reach if you don't reach it early.



BOO, HISS

■ Snakes are deadly so avoid at all costs. Typically snakes will slither along the area between the road and the river, preventing you from pausing, and sometimes they take a ride on logs. Occasionally they appear in both places!



» A young Bob Pappas, showing off his DIY TRS-80 to Timex 1000 development setup.

to create a development environment that provided a quick turnaround. I settled on using my TRS-80 as the development environment and I built a ROM and a board that booted up the Sinclair to be able to receive my Z80 code from the TRS-80 via the serial cassette audio ports. This drastically shortened the development time and Cornsoft was able to move fast in the market by publishing *Frogger* for the Timex Sinclair." This also explains why the ZX81 received an official version of *Frogger* at a time when licensed titles were almost unheard of in the UK.

Frogger proved to be a catalyst for Bob's software career and he went on to work for Adobe, Microsoft and Apple. "A lot of doors were opened", he says. "I became pretty famous and made a lot of money for a teen. Many people I run into mention *Frogger*!"

The success of *Frogger* has led to more than a dozen official follow-ups and remakes over the years, along with countless clones. Parker Brothers, evidently buoyed by the success of the first game, released a sequel in 1984 for home systems titled *Frogger II:* ▶

LEAPING TO NINTENDO

Coder turned author David Lubar reveals how he converted Frogger to Nintendo systems in the Nineties



Can you briefly reveal how you got the job of converting *Frogger* to Nintendo systems?

I had been working for Absolute Entertainment, which went out of business in 1994. One of the partners, Dan Kitchen, got a job with Majesco. He contacted me to do some Game Boy conversions. When Majesco licensed *Frogger*, Dan asked me if I was interested in doing the conversion. I leapt on it (pun intended) because *Frogger* is a classic game.

By the time you worked on your versions, the original *Frogger* was close to 17 years old. Why was it decided to resurrect such an old game at that time?

That was a decision made by Majesco. Though looking back it was a good idea, as there's both a nostalgic market for old games among people who grew up with them and a new market among younger players who are looking for something simple to enjoy. My instructions were pretty much, 'Put *Frogger* on the Game Boy and Super Nintendo.' The graphic ability of the Game Boy probably wasn't much better than the original arcade game. The Super Nintendo conversion had nicer graphics. Artist Bill Jannott did an amazing job with the water.

You also worked on *Frogger 2* for the Game Boy Color, which is a big expansion over the original. As the game's designer how did you approach the sequel?

My approach was to try to push the handheld beyond what it had done so far, while making sure that the core game was fun. Pulling off coding



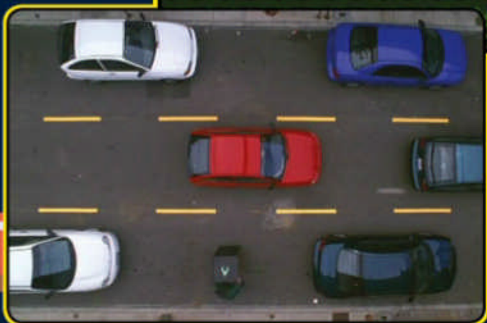
» [Game Boy Color] David couldn't pass up on the opportunity to work on a classic game such as *Frogger*.

stunts is meaningless if the game isn't fun to play. I had been fooling around with a technique to do multi-plane scrolling and this game seemed like the perfect opportunity to use that idea. I also managed to create what looked like huge sprites, by combining sprites and the background. As for gameplay, I just tried to expand the activities beyond jumping across horizontally-scrolling objects.

These days you're better known as a writer than a programmer, but where does working on the *Frogger* games fit into your list of achievements? Are you proud of those games?

Frogger was basically a simple task. I'm proud I got the chance to do it, but pretty much any competent coder could have done the same thing. I feel that *Frogger 2* can stand as one of my best pieces of coding and design. If you're curious about the writing I'm most proud of check out my novel, *Character, Driven*, which seems to be getting some nice attention – although it's nowhere near as popular as *Frogger*!





» [PS3] *Hyper Arcade Edition* includes unlockable skins from Konami hits *Castlevania* and *Contra* (pictured).

» The episode of *Seinfeld* featuring *Frogger* ends with a great gag, as George tries to wheel the coin-op across a busy road.

> **"For high-level Frogger play the biggest challenge is handling the speed transitions"**
> Don Hayes

ThreeeDeep! As the subtitle suggests, the game features three individual screens of frog-hopping action rather than one. An arcade sequel (of sorts) arrived in 1991, on the tenth anniversary of the original, courtesy of Sega. Called *Ribbit!* the game introduced coin-op play, varied stages and bonus rounds.

It wouldn't be until the late Nineties, however, that the *Frogger* name returned to the fore. Hasbro Interactive licensed the property from Konami and successfully rebooted the property for PlayStation and PC in 1997. Simply titled *Frogger*, the game followed the-then popular trend of taking classic coin-ops and giving them a polygonal makeover. The following year more traditional updates were released for the game.com, Game Boy Color, Super Nintendo and Mega Drive. The floodgates then opened and between 2000 and 2012 not a year went by without some kind of *Frogger* release. There was *Frogger: The Token Update*, *Frogger: The Improbable Adventure*, *Frogger: The Rudimentary RPG* and not forgetting *Frogger: With Puzzles*. In all seriousness, some of the entries are worth playing (see the 'Frogspawn' box out for the most interesting ones), but it's often tricky to tell whether they're aimed at nostalgic adults or their young children.

None of these releases have any bearing whatsoever on the iconic original which has become firmly ingrained in popular culture along with games like *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man*. Before *Frogger* cameoed in *Wreck-It Ralph* and, er, *Pixels*, the game famously featured in US sitcom *Seinfeld* (as referenced in this article's intro). In an episode from 1998, George Costanza visits an old high school haunt and finds the *Frogger* machine he used to play is still there, and what's more his ten-year-old high-score is still standing. This amusing plot threat actually highlighted another element of the *Frogger* phenomenon – it's a hotly-contested high-score game.

FROGSPAWN

A round-up of the key sequels that ventured 'beyond the pond'



FROGGER II: THREEEDEEP!

1984, VARIOUS

■ This sequel for home systems sees you progressing through three separate screens. The first screen (pictured above, on the Atari 8-bit) is underwater, proving that our amphibian hero can swim after all! An odd game that feels slightly thrown together.



FROGGER

1997, PS1/PC

■ The packaging proudly exclaimed the return of a gaming icon with 'He's Back!', and it wasn't wrong. This is one of the best examples of how you update a classic for the PlayStation era, and it still holds up well today, despite the time limits sapping some of the fun.



FROGGER 2: SWAMPY'S REVENGE

2000, PS1/DREAMCAST/PC

■ The 1997 *Frogger* revived the series and this excellent sequel from Blitz Games basically acted as a springboard for future titles, moving further away from the simple arcade challenge of the original into adventure-platformer territory.

When the episode was broadcast George's score of 860,630 points would have put him at the top of the Twin Galaxies rankings, comfortably beating Mark Robichek's score of 442,330 which had stood since 1982. Although the score was fictional, it was deemed beatable and in June 2009 two of the game's best-known professional players, Pat Laffaye and Don Hayes, vied to topple the score at a special gathering. Don says: "There was an event set up at the Challenge Arcade in Pennsylvania for both Pat and myself to try and break the fictional score. Neither of us did it there, but I surpassed the score on MAME and Pat beat it on arcade after that."

In many ways *Frogger* is one of the perfect high-score games. There's no 'kill screen' as in *Pac-Man* or *Donkey Kong*, so it's not a case of point pressing within a set number of rounds (the onscreen round indicator stops increasing after round 15 but the game continues regardless). On the other hand, it never becomes an unending endurance challenge because the game requires lots of skill to survive, especially as the speed of objects often changes as you progress. It basically boils down to careful planning and unwavering focus. "For high-level *Frogger* play, the biggest challenge is handling the speed transitions that occur during the game," reveals Don, who has been setting scores on the game since April 1983. "While there isn't a kill screen, there actually is a sequence of events that can happen where a speed transition will make it almost impossible to finish a particular board. And speed transitions that happen while you're trying to get through the cars and trucks can be deadly. This is where skill and focus mostly come into play to avoid unnecessary mistakes."

The current high-score stands at 970,440, achieved by Michael Smith in September 2012. Don believes that the score will be beaten. "A million is achievable," he says. "All three top players have been within about half an hour of doing it out of a five-plus hour game. I'm not finished with it yet. It's still on my videogame to-do list."

So *Frogger* may soon be in the news again, when a seven-figure score is finally registered. But to be honest, the game's enduring appeal means that it has never really been away, and it will continue to entertain, charm and challenge gamers for years to come. Not bad for such as simple game. ★



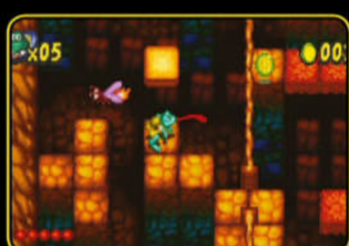
» [PS2] Many of the later games in the series feature crazy multiplayer modes.



FROGGER 2

2000, GAME BOY COLOR

■ Although related to *Swampy's Revenge*, this Game Boy Color release was designed with handheld gaming in mind, and is ideal for playing in short bursts. You can blaze through it fairly quickly, and replay value isn't great, but it's a lot of fun while it lasts.



FROGGER'S ADVENTURES: TEMPLE OF THE FROG

2001, GAME BOY ADVANCE

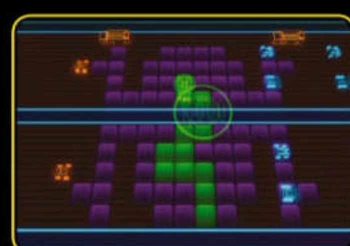
■ Continuing on from *Swampy's Revenge*, this is a fast-moving platformer with added adventure elements that's a good fit for the handheld. Much better than 2002's *Frogger Advance*, which is as dull as dirty pond water.



FROGGER'S ADVENTURES: THE RESCUE

2003, PS2/GAMECUBE/PC

■ The later *Frogger* games for home systems are fairly uninspired 3D efforts, but this one is a cut above thanks to the addition of puzzle elements that keeps things interesting. If you like this then try the 2005 DS/PSP game *Helmet Chaos*.



FROGGER: HYPER ARCADE EDITION

2012, PS3/X360/WII

■ In many ways this downloadable title is the ultimate *Frogger* package, featuring a wealth of game modes – some classic, most brand new – and multiplayer support. It's a kitchen sink affair, but done with obvious affection for the original.

CONVERSION CAPERS

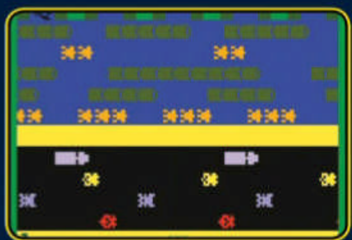
We compare all 20 of the home conversions released in the early Eighties. That's a lot of Frogger

ATARI 2600 (CART)



The standard 2600 version is a surprisingly good effort. The graphics are basic and prone to flicker, but all of the features are here and it plays pretty well. The collision detection is a tad suspect but it's not a major issue.

INTELLIVISION



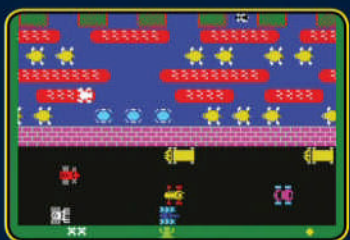
This version features simple graphics and sound, but it plays well and is undeniably *Frogger*. As you'll see in this round-up, it's very difficult to truly mess up a *Frogger* conversion. One interesting note: the screen wraps around on the early levels.

ATARI 2600 (TAPE)



This cassette version required the Starpath Supercharger add-on to run, but if you owned one then this was the version to go for. The extra memory built into the device is used to excellent effect to boost presentation.

COLECOVISION



The pastel hues aside, this is one of the best versions available in terms of playability. Movement is quick and smooth and very close to the arcade original. The TI-99/4A version is almost identical to this so that also comes with a recommendation.

ATARI 8-BIT (CART)



The A8 cartridge version is impressive. The graphics are good, the sound is not too annoying, and movement is nice and smooth. As you'd probably expect the version for the Atari 5200 console is exactly the same as this.

TANDY COCO



The Color Computer lives up to its name with this typically garish effort that's a bit clunky in places (movement is far from smooth), but it generally plays okay. The Dragon 32 version, distributed by Microdeal in the United Kingdom, is identical.

SINCLAIR TIMEX 1000



This version of *Frogger* is by Bob Pappas, who also developed the TRS-80 version and is therefore very similar, albeit with the colours inverted. It's the best *Frogger* game available for this machine (and therefore the Sinclair ZX81, too).

TANDY TRS-80



How do you do *Frogger* on a limited, low-res machine like the TRS-80? You place the road and river on separate screens so that the graphics can be larger and the speed can be maintained. The result works surprisingly well.

SINCLAIR TIMEX 2068



The ZX Spectrum never received an official version of *Frogger*, but the enhanced Timex model did – and, sadly, it really wasn't worth the effort. Poor graphics, terrible sound and turgid playability see this sink straight to the bottom of the pond.

MSX



Konami produced this cart for the first-generation MSX line and it's a solid version overall, spoiled only by the placement of the score and status panel on the right of the screen which results in a squat, narrow play area.

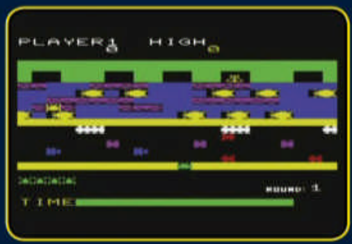
▶ ATARI 8-BIT (DISK V1)

For reasons unknown, Sierra released two separate disk versions for the Atari line. This one, by John Harris, is very similar to the cartridge release (adding some weight to the belief that they were both based on the same core code).



▶ COMMODORE VIC-20

Okay, this is one of the rare exceptions to the 'you can't screw up *Frogger*' adage. Visually, it's really rough and the messy graphics make crossing the river really difficult (although, like the Intellivision version, the screen wraps around).





◀ ATARI 8-BIT (DISK V2)

This alternative version, from Chuck Benton, is slightly uglier than the other Atari 8-bit version, and isn't as smooth, either, but it does feature a unique simultaneous two-player option where our green hero teams up with an orange pal!

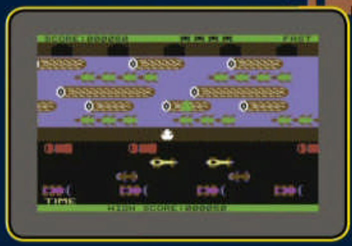


◀ COMMODORE 64 (CART)

Another decent cartridge version from Parker Brothers. Graphically it's slightly better than Sierra's disk version, but we think it doesn't play quite as well (it's more difficult for a start). There's hardly anything in it though.

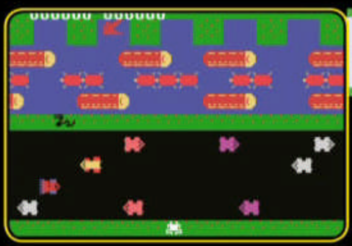
▶ COMMODORE 64 (DISK)

This was coded by Chuck Benton who did the second Atari 8-bit disk version, and as such it's very similar to that version in terms of look and feel. It just has the slight edge over the cartridge version of the game, and scores extra marks for its foot-tapping tunes.



▶ TOMY TUTOR

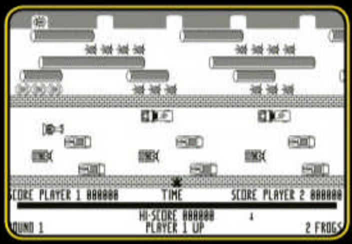
This appears like a simplified version of the ColecoVision release. It's nice and colourful, and it plays well enough. It features all of the enemy types – the only issue is that they appear all at once, rather than as you progress through the levels.





◀ VIDEOPAC G7000

Phillips' Videopac G7000 – or Magnavox Odyssey 2 – version is another one that splits the road and river over two screens, although this one does benefit from colour graphics. It's very basic and bare-boned but does capture the feel of the coin-op.

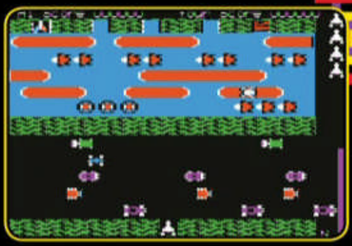


◀ APPLE MAC

It does make you wonder why they bothered here, as the game was never the best fit for the monochrome Mac. Once again it's definitely *Frogger* and all the features are here, so its existence is just about justified.

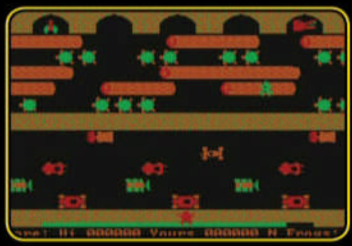
▶ APPLE II

This version is as ugly as hell (check out the masking if you don't believe us!), but as per usual, the graphics do not impact on the gameplay and there's a lot of fun to be had here. It certainly recreates the arcade game better than the Apple Mac version.



▶ PC-DOS

The PC version suffers from poor colours (you can select different palettes but none are ideal) and terrible sound, but following the running theme here, it plays perfectly well. If you wanted *Frogger* on your PC at the time, then you had it, buddy.



RETROREVIVAL

Kirby's Dream Land

IT CONSUMES, BUT IT DOES NOT FEED



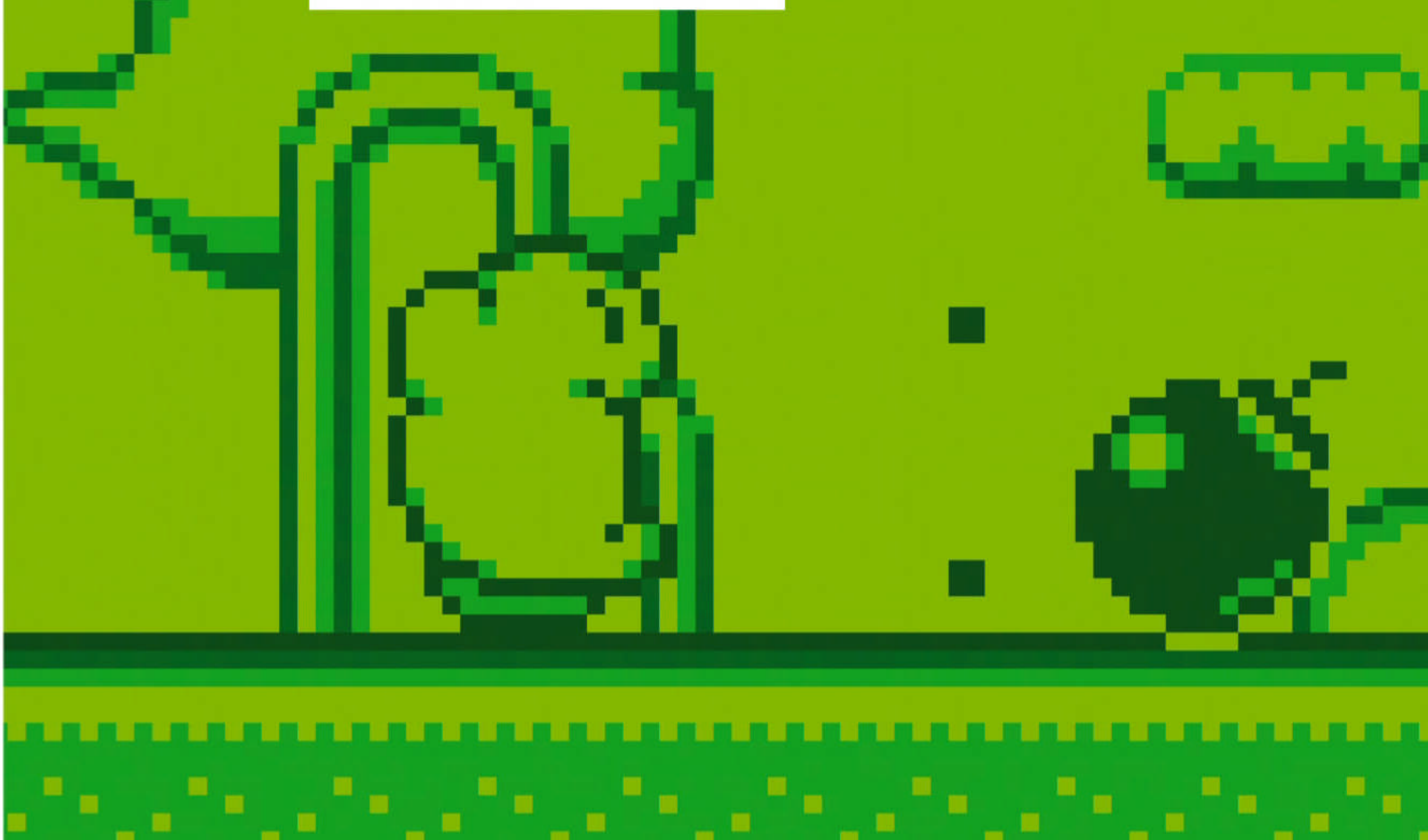
» GAME BOY » HAL LABORATORY » 1992

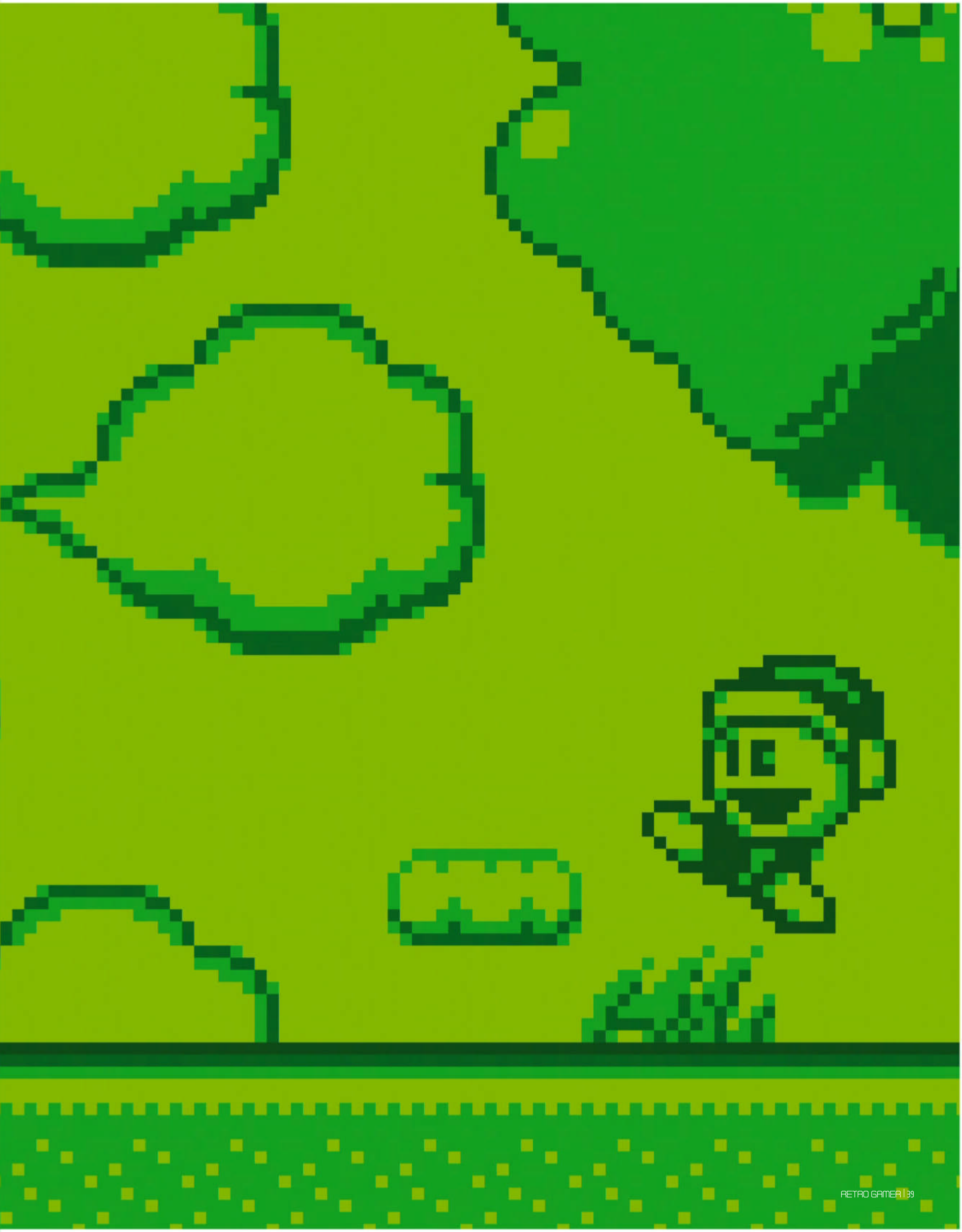
You don't always get things exactly right on your first attempt, and neither do videogame developers – even the very best can miss out something that will come to define the series down the line. You couldn't perform combos in the original *Street Fighter*, Sonic didn't learn the spin dash until the sequel, and Kirby couldn't copy any abilities until *Kirby's Adventure*. That last point is a bit problematic, though.

I've always accepted Kirby's constant inhalation of enemies as a means of drawing some form of sustenance – after all, *something* is clearly happening in there when Kirby copies abilities. But when this aspect of the character is removed, suddenly there's no advantage in simply digesting enemies, and it's better to spit them out. Are we to believe that none of the creatures in Dream Land actually have nutritional value? This seemingly happy platform game suddenly becomes a lot less jolly when you consider that Kirby's clearly rampant hunger might never be adequately satisfied.

I appreciate that this might sound a little far-fetched, but just look at the game's cover art – our hero is white as a sheet, a far cry from the vibrant pink hue that we're used to. Clearly Kirby has got some health problems that need to be addressed. Seriously, knowing that your protagonist is barely keeping the Grim Reaper at bay is extremely disconcerting, and we're surprised Nintendo would make a game this dark.

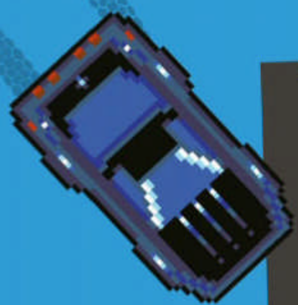
Then again, I could just be reading too much into some early instalment weirdness… *





ALL POINTS BULLETIN
APB

Casual gamers appreciated APB's humour, but the game's challenge was gauged for the hardcore – and they didn't appreciate its hybrid nature. Rory Milne files a report on Atari's highway patrol title





» [Arcade] Officer Bob's training day involves 'arresting' some traffic cones and then returning to the station.

While it's true that Dave Theurer's *I, Robot* failed to replicate the massive success of his earlier hits *Missile Command* and *Tempest*, the legendary Atari coder's pioneering polygon coin-op never the less turned a tidy profit. But perhaps because of its low earnings relative to his previous triumphs, or possibly due to the programmer's relentless drive for innovation, Dave's next project – *APB* – would be sprite-based rather than polygon-powered and would favour realism over science-fiction. In keeping with *I, Robot,* however, which combined platforming with shooting, *APB* would also mix genres, with the result that Dave's top-down cops-and-robbers title would be as much a shoot-'em-up as it was a driving game. However, while the Atari coder's initial concept for *APB* brought to mind earlier arcade releases – such as *Spy Hunter* and *The Battle-Road* – the sophisticated game editor that he built over the subsequent two-and-a-half years and the wealth of graphic material produced by his artist Alan Murphy during the same period suggested a game that would be anything but derivative.







> "I liked to get to work at like five or six in the morning and then work until five or six in the evening"
> Mike Hally



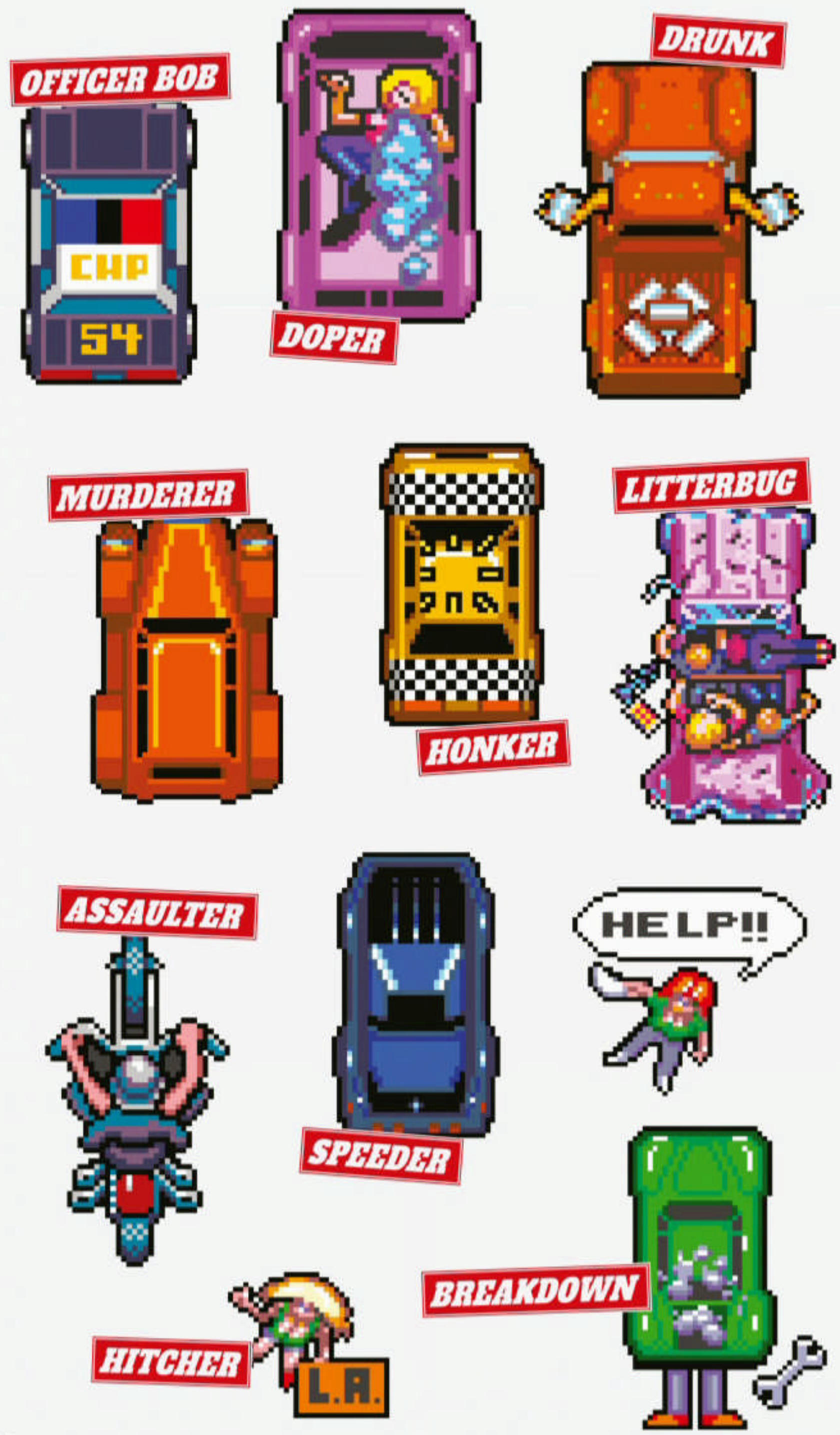
» [Arcade] Anything goes when Bob is pursuing APBs – tail-ending, firearms and speeding are all fully authorised.

Following this 30-month marathon of tool building and sprite rendering, Dave, Alan and their four-man audio team were joined by the accomplished Atari designer Mike Hally, who viewed *APB*'s lengthy design phase as time well spent. "The whole premise of the design evolved around creating a pretty massive playfield of exploration," Mike explains. "Alan – a very, very talented artist – was doing the graphic tiles and all the animations. One of Dave's strengths was building tools, and just getting all the basics of the game to a point where it could then be pieced together. That's when the playability of the project really took off. Because now they had one person solely responsible – and working 100 per cent of their time – just on building the world for the game itself."

One particular aspect of Mike's construction of *APB*'s world ultimately helped to define the title's gameplay, as the designer's efforts on Dave Theurer's night shift led to *APB* setting the

PIXEL PERFECT

A sprite-by-sprite guide to Atari's arcade hybrid



IT'S CRIMINAL!

How to take down some of APB's hardest perps





FREDDY FREAK

■ Hippy Freddy can be difficult to ram off the road. The trick is to edge ahead and then turn hard into his van and show him the strong arm of the law.



CANDY GOODBODY

■ It seems extreme to shoot up Candy's car for prostitution, but it really slows her down. Just be careful not to hit lawful drivers.



BERNIE GASMAN

■ Given how fast this crazed pyromaniac's car is, it requires a few holes shot in it during pursuit, but get close up before firing.



PHILLIP FUSE

■ You can find this unhinged felon throwing dynamite off an overpass. First, knock him off, then perforate his car and run him off the road.



COOL HAND DUKE

■ The Duke pimps next to a bar and won't hit the road until you approach him. He's easiest to stop on the nearby straight highway.



BUZZ GEIGER

■ He's in possession of nuclear fuel, hence his face, but gunning down Buzz's truck and forcing it off *APB*'s six-lane highway is still your best bet.



JOE KORNCOB

■ Given that his crime is water utility fraud, it makes sense that Mr Korncob spends his time hiding out in a viaduct. His truck is slow but very sturdy.



LUIGI DE MUCCIO

■ Car thief Luigi doesn't drive as fast as you would expect, but he's difficult to run off the road so pursue him with all guns blazing.



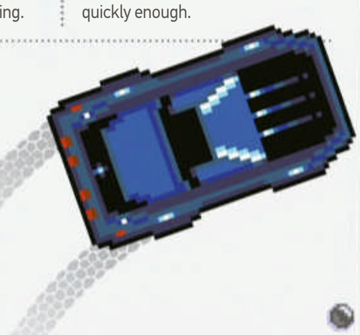
DICK SLOB

■ This drooling imbecile of a toxic waste dumper is initially slow to get going but picks up speed if you don't put him down quickly enough.



IGGY DINGDONG

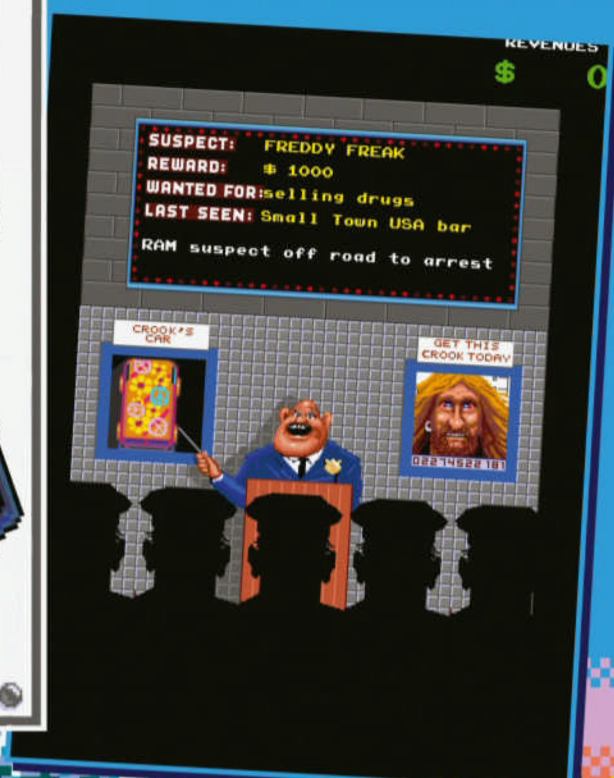
■ Iggy drives the wrong way down highways and then turns on a dime, so be prepared to drive dangerously in order to detain him.



> **"We got a Zzap!64 Sizzler, and it was certainly better than some of my other stuff"**
>
> Carleton Handley

▶ game's highway patrol protagonist with multiple objectives to meet during each of his fleetingly-short shifts. As well as avoiding collisions, Officer Bob would have to maintain his squad car's fuel levels, meet arrest quotas and bust major criminals – the titular APBs. The combination of which the designer hoped would provide replay value. "I think it's like the analogy about keeping a bunch of plates spinning at the same time. Now, obviously some of them were more important than others. You didn't have to worry about how much gas you had all the time; you just had to make sure that you knew where a gas station was. You had to know at the start of the round what your quota was and the bad guy you were looking for. But there were so many different ways to go about it that it did allow for you to keep exploring, and keep coming back and trying it over and over again."

In terms of tone, *APB* had embraced knockabout humour long before Mike joined the project, but he remembers joining in on the fun to the extent that his bosses felt the need to reign him in. "They wanted to add a lot of humour," Mike says of coder Dave Theurer and artist Alan Murphy. "There's that little





» [Arcade] Taxis are called 'Honkers' in *APB*, and Officer Bob is often tasked with arresting them.

bar that you drove by, and you see in the windows, like, people chugging. The little scenes like when the cops would pull the guy out of the car and throw him in the trashcan. Then you had the interrogation where once you had captured one of the criminals you could see them behind frosted glass and you had to get the information out of them. Originally, I had them doing groin punches, but once management found out we had to modify it!"

The third core element of *APB* – the sheer scale of the world that Dave had facilitated, Alan had visualised and Mike was building – subsequently gave their work in progress further definition as the game's level designer endeavoured to liberally ▶

CONVERTING APB

Carleton Handley on his Zzap!64 Sizzler-awarded C64 APB conversion



Had you played *APB* before Domark assigned Walking Circles the licence?

No. I'd never seen it. We used to go to Manchester – me and some friends – and play in an arcade, and I don't think they had *APB*, but they had *Toobin'*, and we really liked it. I think we were pitching for both *Toobin'* and *APB*, and I remember thinking: 'I hope we get *Toobin'*.' And then we didn't, we got *APB*, which is a good game.

Did you get much access to the coin-op while developing the C64 version?

We had the arcade machine. It was actually the second one – the first one the courier delivered, they dropped it! It was all shrink-wrapped and smashed to pieces. It took a while to get a replacement. Our accountant – David Llewellyn – he wasn't as 'busy' as the rest of us – shall we say – so he played *APB* and mapped it all out. He'd sit there with free-play, he spent days just playing it.

Was much taken out of the coin-op in order to squeeze it into the C64?

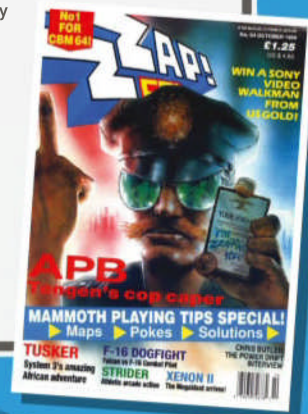
I don't think there was that much missing – some of the animations, and the barriers that help guide you to the correct place that you need. And the title screen is really just a bunch of text. Also, if you get past the last day, it just crashes. I don't think we took it into account that people would ever complete it.

What challenges were involved in converting *APB* to the C64?

Someone more senior than me wanted to keep the same aspect ratio of the arcade – so more vertical. So there's a big clumsy-looking panel on the right. It was made up of sprites, so we had very few for the main game. And because we used the Spectrum map graphics we had to scroll colours as well, so we were doing twice as much work.

How do you feel about the C64 *APB* now?

There were some issues. The APBs themselves are very difficult to find. The arcade game had fenced-off roads each day so you couldn't go the wrong way, effectively. But on the 8-bits, we didn't have the ability to do that. But, generally speaking, I think it's a good version of the arcade game. We got a *Zzap!64* Sizzler, and it was certainly better than some of my other stuff.





BUSTING THE BADDIES

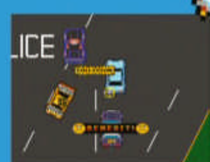
Follow these tips to ensure your highway is perp free

WAILING SIREN



■ As well as providing Officer Bob's main means of detaining perps, his siren serves a useful secondary purpose. When chasing offenders, it will encourage obstructive law-abiding drivers to pull over so Bob can continue his high-speed pursuit unhindered.

POLICE HARASSMENT



■ As well as safe streets, *APB*'s legal motorists expect not to be crashed into. Additionally, Bob gets a 'demerit' for doing so if his siren isn't on, which should be actively avoided since accruing too many will cost him his badge.

TARGET PRACTICE



■ Fulfilling targets is Officer Bob's core objective, but catching criminals, attending breakdowns and picking up hitchers can be overwhelming. The key is to get good at meeting Bob's daily offender quota before even considering his other commitments.

BUMPER CARS



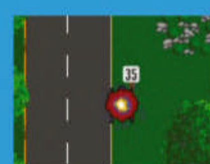
■ Officer Bob is supposed to make arrests by targeting offenders with a crosshair and then sounding his siren, but a faster, riskier method is to keep Bob's siren on constantly and ram into one criminal after another while avoiding lawful drivers.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE



■ In addition to working against the clock, Officer Bob also has to keep his squad car fuelled up. These considerations can be negated to some extent by learning the locations of local gas stations and donut shops – since donuts extend Bob's shifts.

ROAD SAFETY



■ It seems counter-intuitive given Officer Bob's profession, but *APB* rewards careful driving. That's not to say that Bob has time to drive slowly, it's more that there's a harsh time-penalty for collisions with roadside furniture and parked vehicles.



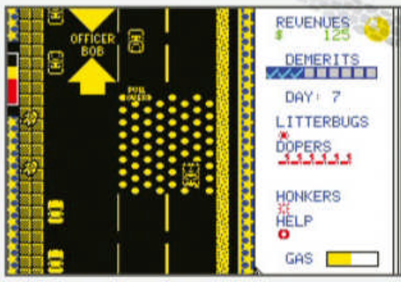
CONVERSION CAPERS

Learn which ports are worth investigating



COMMODORE 64

■ Rightly praised by magazines on its release, the C64 *APB* really captures the look and feel of the coin-op. Obvious concessions include far less detailed vehicles, a cut in speed and the removal of the original's road blocks and speech, but the core gameplay and zany humour is all there.



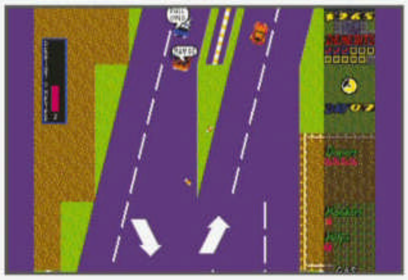
ZX SPECTRUM

■ Although the Spectrum *APB* can't compare to the coin-op in terms of visuals, its small monochrome vehicles do look distinct from each other. Just as importantly, the Spectrum version faithfully replicates the bulk of the original's gameplay – and it runs slightly faster than its C64 counterpart.



AMSTRAD CPC

■ Far from a lazy Spectrum port, the Amstrad *APB* sports attractive Mode 0 visuals, which arguably make it the best-looking 8-bit conversion. Sadly, these graphics come at the cost of a small playfield and jerky scrolling, but the coin-op's gameplay survives the translation.



AMIGA

■ The Amiga *APB*'s cars are smaller and less detailed and it's not quite as fast as the coin-op – it also lacks some of its in-game speech. Otherwise, this is a close approximation of the original, which is impressive given the system's comparative lack of power.



ATARI ST

■ The sounds and visuals of the Atari ST *APB* fall short of its Amiga counterpart – the playfield on the ST is smaller, the cars are less colourful, there's less speech and the music isn't as good. Crucially, however, the ST version does replicate the coin-op's gameplay just as well as its 16-bit rival.



DOS

■ Considering that the DOS *APB* was designed for a single-voice speaker and a 16-colour palette the end product is a really nice surprise. DOS *APB* boasts responsive controls, precise collision detection and AI that closely mirrors the coin-op's – and it's just as fast as the Amiga version.



ATARI LYNX

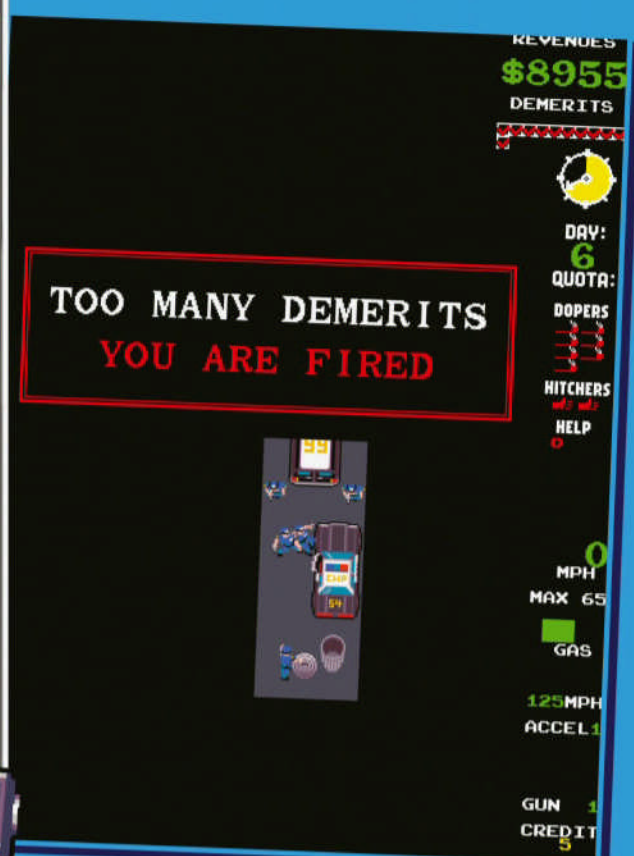
■ Given that this is hosted on a handheld system, credit is due for squeezing so much of the arcade game in. Even the animated scenes and bonus rounds are there, as is the sampled speech. The only downside is that the small playfield doesn't give much advance warning of the road ahead.





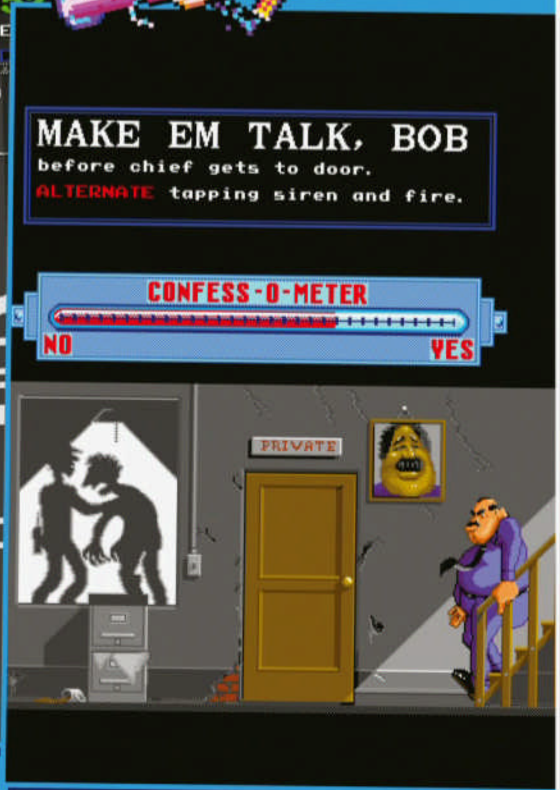
▶ distribute power-ups around the title's huge playfield. "I basically scattered *APB* with crap! I had people driving through forests and all over – off the road – driving into areas where it didn't look like they should be able to drive and they shouldn't be able to find anything but all of a sudden start finding all sorts of stuff."

As well as spending his nights populating *APB*'s world, devising shifts for Officer Bob and playtesting the end-results, Mike additionally had to stand in for project lead Dave Theurer from time to time at meetings held during the day. Discussions held on the game's cabinet design resulted in *APB* being made to resemble a squad car, with a grinning Officer Bob visible from either side-window. In addition to an accelerator and a 360-degree steering wheel, a red/blue light was mounted in the game's marquee, which would flash on and off when its





» [Arcade] No fuel means game over, so periodically filling up at a gas station is essential.



» [Arcade] After apprehending APBs, Officer Bob secures confessions via a *Track & Field* style mechanism.

> **" I scattered APB with crap! I had people driving off the road and all of a sudden they'd start finding all sorts "**
>
> Mike Hally

siren was in use, and a large, expensive monitor was chosen to best show off *APB*'s high-res Atari System 2 graphics. All of which came at a cost, but since *APB* was a driving game, its paltry remaining budget was spent on a metal 'L'-shaped bar with a C64-sized seat at one end, which could be attached to the front of the cabinet – this cut-price seating solution did not set a trend.

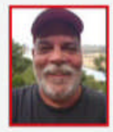
Budgetary concessions aside, *APB* enjoyed a successful launch, although sales tapered off shortly after, which Mike puts down to the game's hybrid gameplay. "I remember going to its introductory show, on the East coast, and we had initial orders for, like, 2,000 units, but there really wasn't much of a reorder on the thing. It's not a hardcore driving game, right? It's not really a shooting game. I think that kinda made it more of a niche game."

Despite disappointing long-term sales, the popularity of coin-op conversions at the time made consumer versions of *APB* a foregone conclusion. UK publisher Domark Software netted the computer licences, while the California-based Quicksilver Software secured the Atari Lynx rights. Glowing reviews followed soon after, and strong sales, coupled with the rarity of the arcade machine, resulted in *APB* becoming better known as a consumer title than a traditional coin-op. Today, at the time of writing this very article, *APB* is nearing its 30th anniversary, so while the conversions still stand up, and the original is playable via emulation, Arcade Club in Greater Manchester and Fun Spot in Orlando both have *APB* cabs. So if either is near you – and if you have an itch to catch some law-breakers – why not pay a visit and play Atari's criminally underrated coin-op. *

Many thanks to Mike Hally and Carleton Handley for sharing their memories of *APB*.

Q&A: MIKE HALLY

Mike Hally talks about creating APB with Dave Theurer



Why was *APB* in development for so long before you eventually joined the project?

There could have been a year's worth of programming just to get to the point where Dave Theurer could start piecing the game together. You had an artist creating tiles [that] could be put together in any configuration – roads, bushes, trees. All that work was done when I came on the project. My responsibility was to take the tiles and start building a world that the player could drive around in.

How did working on *APB* affect your working day?

Dave would get to Atari about four in the afternoon, and we would work until, like, four in the morning. I liked to get to work at like five or six in the morning and then work until five or six in the evening. So I basically had to flip my entire schedule around. The one thing I can definitely say is that there weren't a lot of people bothering us and we could play the music as loud as we wanted!

What was the reasoning for *APB*'s many daily challenges?

I think it just came down to wanting something that felt more real. You're an actual cop – you got a beat, you got a quota, you have timeframes and you can get demerits. It gave a lot of depth for the players to keep learning.

What was the background to *APB*'s unique style of humour?

The artist that worked on *APB* – Alan Murphy – was a surfer. And you know how surfers have a tendency to be a little bit crazy? I think it was the combination of him being an artist and being a little bit crazy – and probably a lot of direction from Dave himself.

What was the thinking behind hiding collectibles in *APB*'s off-road areas?

If there's a whole section of the game that you can explore, but there's nothing defined, then why do it? It helped with the non-linearity, and it gave people small rewards.

Why do you think *APB*'s strong initial sales dried up long-term?

It didn't have a super broad appeal. I think it just touched on a bunch of genres, and that's maybe why it didn't totally catch on.





With arcade-quality graphics great expandability and the ability to play Atari 2600 games, the ColecoVision seemingly had it all. But what was it like to work with? David Crookes finds out



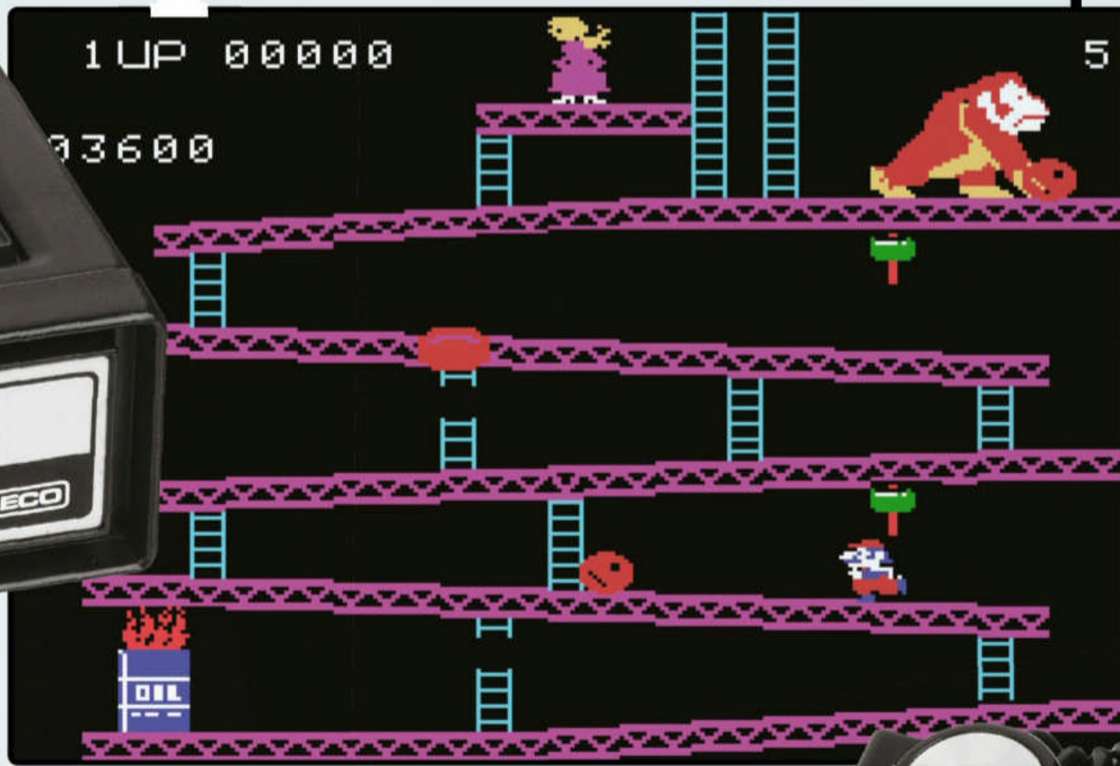
Away from the searing bright lights of the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in 1982, Al Nilsen was standing in the sales meeting room of the Coleco booth, his ears resonating to the sound of an enthusiastic business pitch about a brand-new games console. As the assistant buyer for JCPenny – a huge chain of department stores – his potential backing was judged to be crucial. Yet all Coleco had to show him was a binder containing a plastic sleeve with an image of the machine and some screenshots of games it could run. In the end, it was all he really needed to see.

Back then, the videogame market in the US was worth an estimated $5 billion and there was a clamour for companies to grab a slice for themselves. Al's hunch that Coleco was on to something good was confirmed when he ventured to the firm's offices in Hartford, Connecticut for a proper look. "I saw the actual system this time and I liked it," he says. "They seemed to have done their research and they had a good offering of software." Once again, he was caught up in Coleco's enthusiasm. "They convinced us to carry it," he adds. But he wasn't alone in seeing the console's potential.

Coleco







» [ColecoVision] The excellent port of *Donkey Kong* was a huge coup for Coleco at the time of its release.

On the face of it, the ColecoVision looked good. Bruce Popek, the former director of design at Coleco, said the company's Advanced Research And Development team "had a clear vision of where they wanted to go". Bruce's job was to produce an attractive machine which would load game cartridges from the top into the PCB and allow for accessories and expansion packs via a front port. Most of the design details were determined early on. "There were very few aesthetic models and design changes but we made an early decision to have storage for the controllers. Keeping the cords and both controllers stowed and neat helped convey the message that our gaming system was thought out, self-contained, and easy to use. It was the next step forward."

But what was it about the ColecoVision console that actually made it so special? Was it the 3.58MHz Zilog Z80A CPU, the Texas Instruments' TMS9928A video processor and the power to output at a pixel resolution of 256x192? In many respects, yes. Talk to those involved in the machine, though, and they effectively boil the ColecoVision down to two things: "Graphic superiority", as the Coleco president Arnold C Greenberg told the New York Times in 1982 (games were able to make use of 16 colours and 32 sprites on the screen at once), and lots of appealing licences.

The graphical ability of the ColecoVision was obvious to all those who saw it, not least to artist Dave Johnson who met Eric Bromley, a designer and engineer at Coleco in the hope of securing a job. He recalls being pointed towards several monitors. "He showed me a video loop of an early Smurf animation and assured me that it was a demonstration of the actual ColecoVision hardware," recalls Dave. "Once I saw that, I was convinced that there was major graphic potential."

Dave quickly came to believe that the console was in a position to faithfully convert virtually every major coin-op title, regardless of whether it was originally in raster or vector graphic form. But if the graphics were to be Coleco's gun, the company needed something to fire. Licences would be the effective bullet and the company went after them with dogged determination. "Licences made ColecoVision special," reflects Bruce Popek, the former director of design at Coleco. "Since Coleco was a toy company, it knew full well that proven licences of the top arcade games would draw sales and users from the start. We



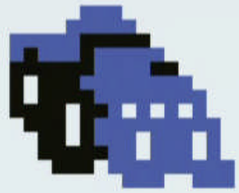


VISION

VIDEO GAME SYSTEM

ColecoVision









had already seen the success of our tabletop arcade games with *Pac-Man*, *Galaxian* and *Frogger*."

Among the licences that Coleco managed to secure was *Donkey Kong* which ended up being included with every console. Bromley had stumbled across the arcade machine when he nipped to the loo on a visit to Nintendo in Japan. He immediately told Nintendo's president Hiroshi Yamauchi that he wanted the game for the ColecoVision which sparked some intense negotiations and ended with Coleco wiring an advance of $200,000 to Nintendo and agreeing to a $2 per unit royalty. But it proved not to be so straight-forward, as Yamauchi went back on the arrangement and decided to hand the rights to Atari instead.

Only by stressing that the power of his console would do greater justice to the look of the game than the Atari 2600 was Bromley able to persuade him to change his mind back. And that, says Bruce, was a defining moment. "It was not just a generic homespun game cartridge," he affirms. No, it was a blockbuster.

Donkey Kong was released along with 11 other games including *Smurf – Rescue In Gargamel's Castle*, *Space Panic*, *Venture*, *Lady Bug*, *Cosmic Avenger*, *Zaxxon* and *Carnival*. Deals had been struck with Sega, Exidy, Universal and, of course, Nintendo, and the graphics of these games were striking a chord with consumers. Retailing for $199.99 in the US and £149 when it went on sale in the UK in 1983, the console began to shift hundreds of thousands of units.



"IT HAD MORE COLOURS, A HIGHER RESOLUTION AND HARDWARE SPRITES"
Dave Johnson

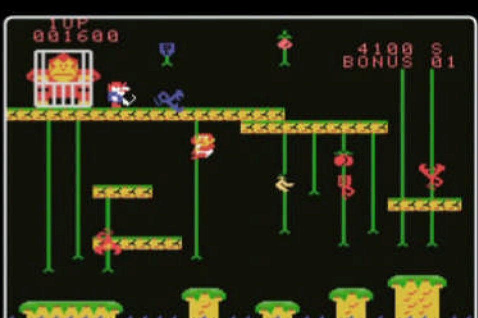
Behind the scenes, though, there was a lot of pressure. The company had made massive investments and it leaned on the development teams to ensure the games were at their very best. "Coleco was a fiery environment, filled with many large personalities at the top and hard dedicated workers below," admits Bruce. "We were asked to do a lot in a short time and it was a very aggressive endeavour for any company of any size."

Luckily, it delivered. *Zaxxon*, for instance, wowed games in the arcades with its state-of-the-art graphics and it not only looked fantastic on the ColecoVision, it was arguably more playable too. ColecoVision soon gained a reputation for being a console which surpassed its hype. "ColecoVision was way better than Atari or Intellivision," says Dave. "It had more colours, a higher resolution and hardware sprites. That is what intrigued me and it had convinced me to take the job."

Converting those early games was no easy task, though. "We were initially designing for hardware that wasn't complete and it was very difficult to predict the final graphic output," Dave says. "We were working

ESSENTIAL GAMES

The games on the Coleco console that demanded your vision



DONKEY KONG JR.

■ Turning the tables on its predecessor, *Donkey Kong*, by putting Junior on a mission to rescue his caged father from Mario, this highly-innovative arcade conversion may have had just three levels but it made up for it with colourful graphics, decent sound and some solid platform-to-vine-traversing, fruit-collecting action.



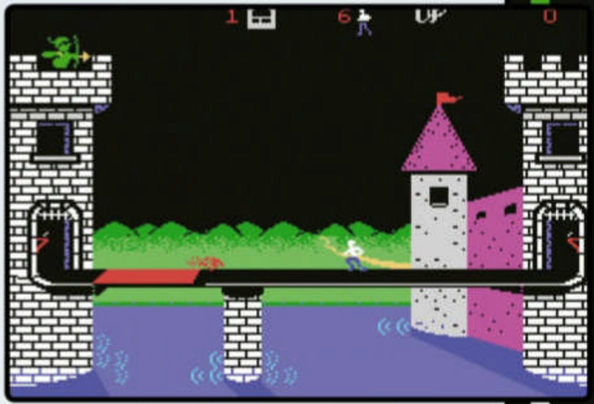
MINER 2049ER

■ Bigger doesn't always mean better yet 11 levels of platforming greatness awaited anyone playing Big Five Software's creation, and that was one more than ColecoVision's rival machines. The premise was simple – to fill each section of flooring by walking on it – but perilous jumps, time limits and enemies conspired against you.

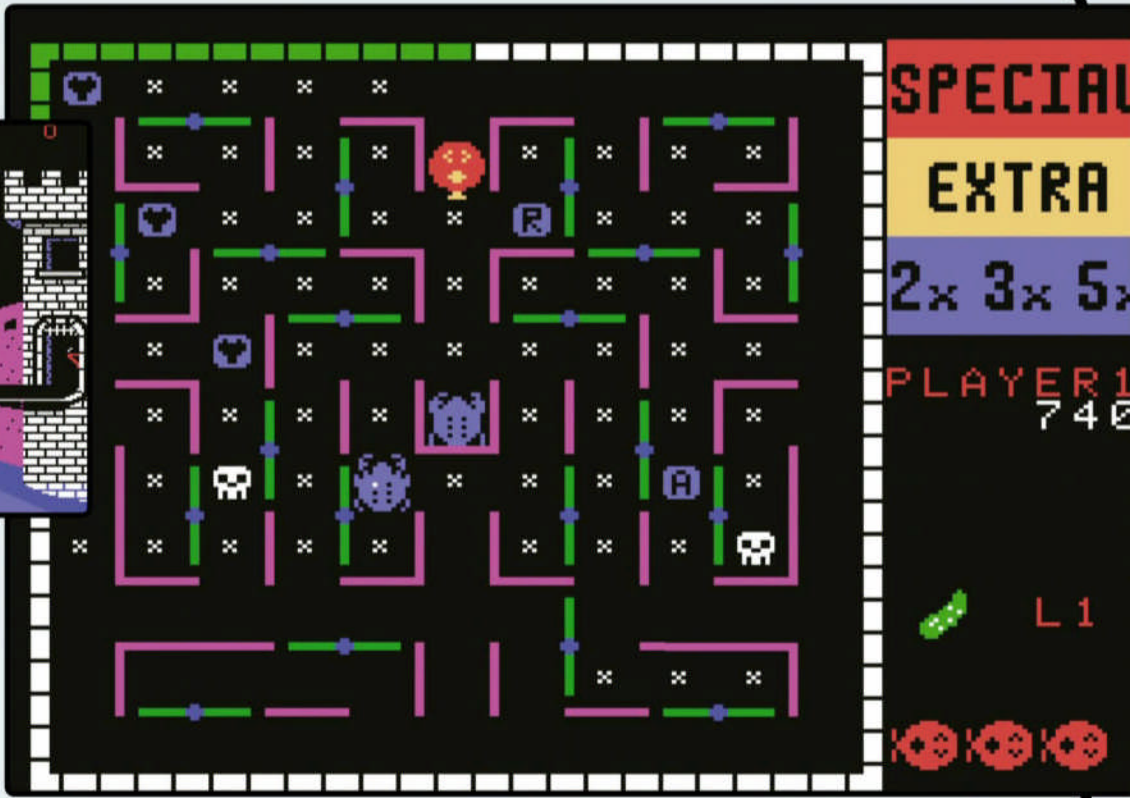


WARGAMES

■ Inspired by the classic 1983 movie, this ColecoVision title had you defending the US from enemy missiles in real time. With six sectors to take into account, and a frantic battle to intercept the onslaught, it was certainly stressful – although the fast-paced action and extensive use of the controller created a classic.



» [ColecoVision] Although *DragonFire* was ported from the Atari 2600 to the ColecoVision, anyone with Expansion Module 1 could have played the original.



» [ColecoVision] *Lady Bug* was a cult favourite and its conversion was widely praised for being as good as if not better than the original.

very primitively on graph paper that was hand-coded into the system. It took a great deal of programming work to actually see something on the screen. We eventually came up with an animation interpreter and a paint system but it took years. We were too busy producing games to spend time producing tools."

Much of the time was spent working out how the original arcade games played and recreating the graphics. "The arcade games used completely different hardware from ColecoVision: they had a different resolution, different processors and so on. Even having access to the source code would have been useless," Dave says. The in-house development team would get an arcade machine and the licence. "That was it," Dave continues. "There was no support from the original developers or manufacturers and we had to actually play the games and videotape them with a camera to zoom in and try and duplicate the game. We were basically starting from scratch as far as production goes."

The process was intense. Game designer Jennell Jaquays worked on converting *Donkey Kong* for the console (eventually becoming director of design at Coleco) and she followed the same pattern of development as she had when porting *Pac-Man* to one of the tabletop arcades: that is, to play it to death. "I have disturbing memories of playing a cocktail table version of *Pac-Man* all day because everything we did in design was based on analysis of play and documenting timing and movement patterns," she says. "I would go home to my apartment across the street from Coleco, try and read a book and see 'things' moving around in between the lines and words on the pages."

She found the most difficult task was converting 'portrait' format games like *Donkey Kong* to 'landscape' televisions. "We did what we could but it meant not being able to 100 per cent represent the original games on the screen," she adds. But the nature of creating games on an 8-bit machine brought other challenges as Debra Lazarus found when she moved from working with computer graphics on mainframe computers producing special effects for TV and film to the ColecoVision in 1983.

"When creating graphics for the pattern plane or sprites, there was always the imagined ideal art, but the reality was that an 8x8 pixel pattern block could only have two colours so we tried to reduce the number of pattern blocks and create shapes that could be used again to assemble graphics in the game, all to save space for speedier play and so on," she says, having worked on *Cabbage Patch Kids*, *Omega Race*, *The Dukes Of Hazzard* and *Destructor*. "The title screens would tend to have richer graphics too."

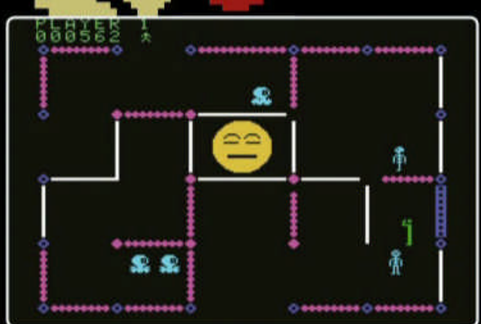
By August 1983, the ColecoVision had proven to be successful. Coleco had sold 1.4 million units and in the second quarter of that year it had earned $9.1 million which was up $7.4 million on the year before. It





BURGERTIME

■ Data East's arcade original relished the chance of turning burger-making into a game and it ported very well to Coleco's console. The delicious idea was to drop the right ingredients on top of each other and avoid Mr Hot Dog, Mr Pickle and Mr Egg, fending them off with pepper if you needed to.



FRENZY

■ This blistering coin-op sequel to the 1980 arcade game *Berzerk* was only ported to ColecoVision and the ZX Spectrum. It showcased excellent animation and solid artificial intelligence which made shooting at enemies tough, and there were nice quirks such as blasting away at some of the walls to form an escape hole.



VENTURE

■ Released as a launch title for the console, this complex treasure-hunting arcade game took place over 12 tombs and it was a great showcase for what the machine was capable of. Despite the poor controls, it was a faithful conversion with a good array of high-pitched tunes to enjoy too.

ColecoVision



EXPANDING OUT

The ColecoVision's expansion modules made it stand out amongst its rivals



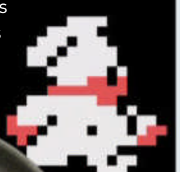
Coleco made a big play on the fact its console could be expanded straight away. "The front port for accessories and expansion packs was pretty much there from the start," says Bruce Popek, former director of design at Coleco. "It made us different." And yet, ironically, it helped make the ColecoVision into a makeshift Atari 2600 anyway.

Expansion Module 1 took advantage of the fact Atari's console used standard, off-the-shelf components. By stuffing a recreated 2600 into the sizeable module using the hardware only, the reproduction was so faithful it ran almost all of Atari's games for the machine, substantially expanding the ColecoVision's catalogue.

It had a slot where Atari cartridges could be inserted as well as the necessary switches and controller ports for 2600 compatibility. What's more Atari was powerless to stop it being sold. It tried to sue but it lost and, to make matters worse, Coleco then went on to produce a standalone, cheaper 2600 clone called the Gemini. Meanwhile, it launched the Expansion Module 2 which brought a steering wheel and pedal to the ColecoVision allowing gamers to play driving and racing titles including a port of *Turbo* which was bundled in the box. This peripheral was plugged into the controller port rather than the Expansion Module area.

The third module was also interesting. It allowed the console to be turned into Coleco's ADAM computer and it was rather comprehensive, coming with a keyboard, a memory unit and a letter-quality printer. There was even a built-in word processor although Smart BASIC needed to be loaded in by tape. Completing the set of expansions was the Roller Controller trackball which could also be used with the ADAM and came with a port of *Slither*, and the Super Action Controller Set.

The latter was a mind-boggler, since it appeared to add everything bar the kitchen sink: the new controller had a 12-button keypad, an eight-directional joystick, a speed roller and four customisable triggers on a pistol-like grip. It's almost as if Coleco was talking criticism of the original controllers to heart and figuring it would leave no stone unturned.





was the only one of the three big console makers to turn a profit. Atari and Mattel made losses. But good marketing helped. "The name of the game was games," says Alfred Kahn who led the licensing division for Coleco and marketed the console. "Getting the best possible games for the ColecoVision on an exclusive basis – at least initially – was important and there was an expectation they would be good because the ColecoVision had better graphics than its rivals."

Third-party devs were also making games for it. Big Five Software's *Miner 2049er* was converted to the system and there was a great mix of coin-op translations including *Mr. Do!* and *Frenzy* along with sporting titles including *Baseball* and *Football*. Atari peripherals could be used with the console and the Expansion Module 1 enabled the machine to play Atari 2600 games. It became an important console and even Atari saw the benefit of selling games for it.

"When I started programming the ColecoVision console at Atari in 1982, it was far more powerful than the Atari 2600 and Mattel Intellivision," says coder Jim Eisenstein. "The Atari 5200 was the only real competition in the USA in terms of graphics capability." As he found out, though, coders sometimes had to work hard to get the best out of the machine.

Jim's first game for the ColecoVision was *Galaxian*. "I was committed to reproducing the arcade game experience, making it look and feel as much like the

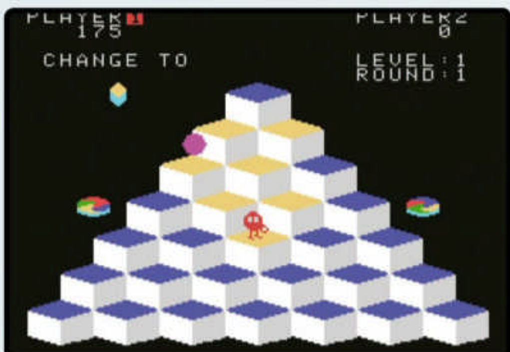
"THE ATARI 5200 WAS THE ONLY REAL COMPETITION IN THE USA"

Jim Eisenstein

actual arcade game and, if possible, more authentic than the 5200 version that was already out," he says. "To accomplish that, the game needed its signature flickering multicoloured star field smoothly scrolling behind an armada of multicoloured dancing and attacking space bugs. It was all done in hardware on the arcade version of *Galaxian*. Unfortunately, the ColecoVision hardware wasn't designed for anywhere near that level of visual complexity."

The problem was that the hardware provided a way to scroll a star field background yet there weren't nearly enough sprites to display the fully-animated space bug force in front of it. Worse, several sprites would be needed to display each multicoloured bug. Rather than make sacrifices to the game and have fewer space bugs, single-coloured bugs and a stationary background star field, Jim noted the Texas Instruments graphics chip in the ColecoVision had a unique character map mode. "It could be coerced into providing the desired outcome. There was no equivalent mode on the 5200," he says.

"By playing a lot of tricks with the graphics controller, scrolling and animating the star field background in software and compositing animated software sprites into the background with really tight assembly code that used both banks of Z80 registers to avoid memory access delays, I was able to get a flickering star background smoothly scrolling vertically behind the



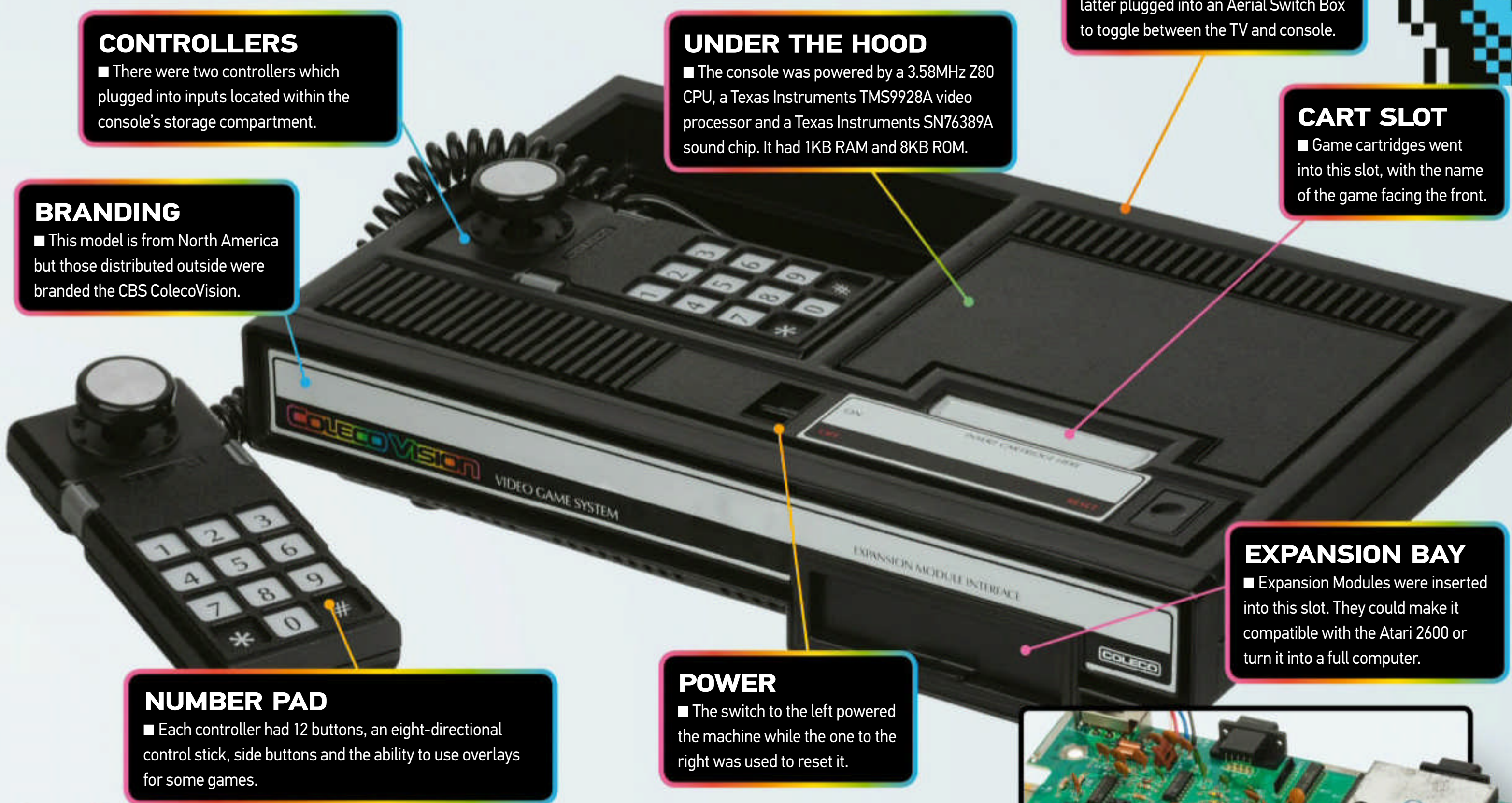


» [ColecoVision] The ColecoVision version of *Zaxxon* was the first home port to make use of isometric graphics.



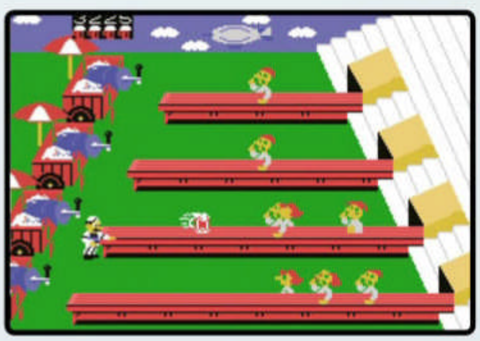
A CLEAR VISION

It's a striking design, but what did what on the ColecoVision?



whole armada of space bugs dancing and attacking at 60fps." It got around the graphics chip's poor scrolling abilities.

Such efforts highlighted another problem, though. While all of these efforts were going into faithfully converting games from the arcades, there was no widespread attempt to truly push the console's capabilities. "We were never given the freedom to explore original designs," says Jennell. "The best we managed along those lines were intended to support movie or cartoon character licences which came with just as many restrictions on design. So, I don't think we pushed it as far as we could go. We were always budget-limited by the cost of ROM parts, often forcing us into lower graphics modes for some games. And the emphasis on arcade knockoffs kept us from exploring more complex types of gameplay."



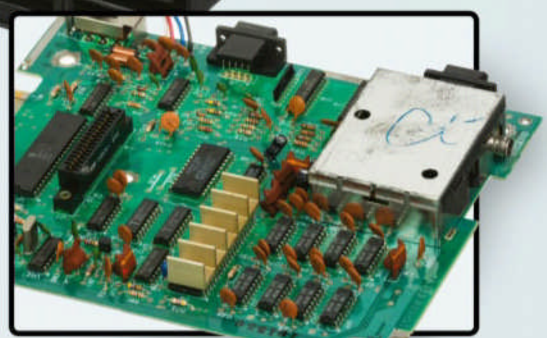
» [ColecoVision] In *Tapper*, you played a barman, but this version was one of the few arcade conversions to fall short of the original coin-op.

In that sense, some developers felt more comfortable working for other machines. "Decades later, I had the chance to sit in the audience of a panel of the Blue Sky Rangers, Mattel's videogame design team," Jennell says. "They had fewer graphics to work with, but far more freedom to explore designing games that maximized what the system could do."

Jim also bemoans the closed graphics architecture of the ColecoVision. "It wasn't designed for flexibility," he says. "I don't feel that there was much more capability to squeeze out of it." He cites *Pole Position* on the Atari 5200 as an example. "The programmer had control of each scanline on the screen and could use the same techniques Namco had used to make the track appear 3D and very fluid," Jim explains. "We were working on a version of *Pole Position* for the ColecoVision before the videogame crash of 1983 and had been unable to get an acceptable track with that graphics controller."

That videogame crash came at a bad time for Coleco. It had released an home computer called ADAM in 1983, promoting it as the best machine for word processing and games. At the same time, it launched an expansion module for the ColecoVision which turned the console into the same computer. It flopped. Bruce says it was "never available in numbers" but, to make things worse, sales of the ColecoVision were declining. In March 1984, Coleco posted a $35 million fourth quarter loss and there was talk of discontinuing the ADAM. The company pulled out of gaming in the Summer of 1985 – the same year the NES arrived.

"Our ColecoVision team was slated to begin developing for the NES as it was also Z80-based and



» Here's a look at the innards that helped power Coleco's 8-bit console.

we were the in-house experts on that system," says Jim. "The NES platform was far less impressive than Coleco's but they had Shigeru Miyamoto, the Walt Disney of videogames." In fact, Nintendo began to dominate, closely followed by Sega as a two-horse race emerged. This continued until the PlayStation arrived – a console, like ColecoVision, which seemingly came from nowhere. The Coleco dream was over.

Attempts were made to revive it with the Coleco Chameleon, announced on 17 December 2015. But questions over a 'prototype' emerged at the Toy Fair in 2016 and, after a huge kerfuffle, it was canned. Yet the original console still has lots of fans and a good community following (be sure to check out colecovisionzone.com), and there's also a comprehensive book on the machine called *Coleco – The Complete History* written by Antoine Clerc-Renaud.

"I feel the ColecoVision is wrongly classified as a second-generation console because in terms of power, it was closer to the NES than the Atari 2600," Antoine says. "It also set out to accomplish one goal: to bring the arcade games at home and it did so beautifully. For me, the ColecoVision will always be special."


PHANTAS



Sega's sci-fi epic was many things – a pioneer of the JRPG, a key release for the genre's popularity in the West and a key reason to own a Master System. Nick Thorpe talks to Yuji Naka to learn how it all came together...

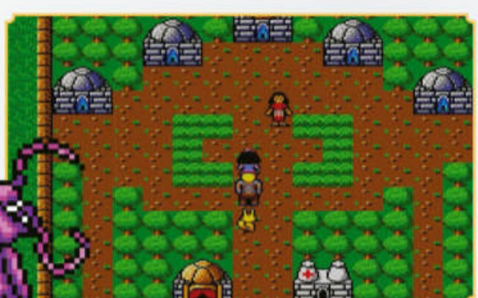


IN THE KNOW

- » **PUBLISHER:** SEGA
- » **DEVELOPER:** SEGA
- » **RELEASED:** 1987
- » **PLATFORM:** MASTER SYSTEM
- » **GENRE:** RPG

It's funny to think that there was a time when the Japanese RPG wasn't a particularly well-defined type of game, but 1987 definitely qualifies. Most Japanese game designers were still taking their inspiration from Western games such as *Wizardry* and *Ultima*, but Enix's *Dragon Quest* had achieved enormous success on the Famicom – and in doing so, it spurred the development of rival console RPGs and laid the groundwork for the genre as we know it today. On computers, Falcom was developing the first game in the seminal *Ys* series, and the Famicom was to benefit from Square's decision to throw resources behind a project called *Final Fantasy*. Sega couldn't rely on third-party support to ensure that its own Master System console had an RPG though, so it began to put together a team of talented designers to create such a game.

The overall game design was coordinated by Kotaro Hayashida, who had achieved prominence for his work on *Alex Kidd In Miracle World*. He was joined by other key members of that game's team, too – Rieko Kodama served as the lead artist, while Tokuhiko Uwabo composed the music. Other key staff included Chieko Aoki, who contributed much of the story, and Miki Morimoto who worked on the game design. Kazuyuki Shibata handled monster design, and other graphics were drawn by Koki Sadamori, Takako Kawaguchi, Hitoshi Yoneda and Naoto Oshima.


» [Master System] Towns usually have a variety of shops as well as inhabitants to learn information from.



In a 1993 interview for the *World Of Phantasy Star* book, Rieko Kodama explained that the programmers were struggling to implement 3D dungeons, and it was this that drove the project's main programmer to join the team. Yuji Naka had built a reputation on handling difficult 8-bit conversions of state-of-the-art arcade games such as *Space Harrier* and *Out Run*, and set about making a 3D wireframe imaging system.

Like many designers in Japan at that time, Naka's RPG experience was defined by Western games. "I'm not sure if it was on the Commodore 64 or the Amiga, but there was a 3D dungeon RPG at the time. The dungeon was shown in a smaller box on the screen, so it wasn't the full screen," remembers the programmer. "I was inspired by that, so I started experimenting on my own with the vision of trying to make a full-screen dungeon, rather than running it in a box. It wasn't necessarily like an RPG, strictly speaking. I wanted it to be a speedy, action-like game. That vision was the beginning of *Phantasy Star*."

The attempt to make a fast game shouldn't be a surprise, given that Naka is famous for both *Sonic The Hedgehog* and his love of Ferraris. However, the initial attempt to do this went wrong in a variety of ways. "The vision was to have a 3D dungeon in full ▶



A NEW GENERATION

How Sega revitalised its classic for the PlayStation 2 era





During the early Noughties, Sega got particularly serious about revamping its own back catalogue for the PlayStation 2, to the point of setting up a new joint venture with D3 Publisher (named 3D AGES) and a budget label called Sega Ages 2500. The game chosen to launch this new range of games was a remake of *Phantasy Star*, titled *Phantasy Star Generation: 1*, released on 28th August 2003 in Japan only.

The game has been given a facelift, featuring high-resolution (albeit low-budget) 2D visuals and real-time 3D dungeons, as well as depicting multiple monsters and the player characters in battle. The music has also been updated, but the biggest change comes in terms of storytelling. Not only were the characters given more expressive dialogue, but additional illustrated cutscenes gave a greater dramatic flair to proceedings.

The remade game was due to be released in North America by Conspiracy Entertainment as part of the confusingly-named *Phantasy Star Trilogy* pack, which was set to contain remakes of *Phantasy Star*, *Phantasy Star II* and *Phantasy Star IV* (the third game was conspicuously absent from Sega's plans). However, the series of remakes finished prematurely with *Phantasy Star Generation: 2* and the compilation was quietly canned. Japanese players instead got to enjoy *Phantasy Star Complete Collection*, an emulated collection of all the Master System, Mega Drive and Game Gear games in the series.

Fortunately for those of us who don't speak Japanese, an English patch for *Phantasy Star Generation: 1* was eventually released via the Phantasy Star Cave website, and is still under active development.

screen rather than in a little box, and I managed to get it running at the speed I had intended. But at the time I was experimenting, I wasn't mindful about hardware limitations – I was just doing an experimental build," he explains. "I was able to smoothly go down the corridors and do quick turns, but then I experienced motion sickness. This was the first time I'd ever experienced motion sickness." Naka wasn't the only one affected; in *World Of Phantasy Star*, Miki Morimoto compared the dizziness to being drunk.

Ironically, it was having to be mindful of hardware limitations that fixed the issue. "At the time the limitation was four megs, that was all we could get on a Master System cartridge, and I'd used all of that space to run this thing that I'd built," says Naka. "To fit the content in, we had to slow it down, compress and optimise. That fixed the motion sickness, but the game you experienced on release was slower than what the original intention was. In my memory, it's the first game that left me feeling motion sickness."

Beyond the incredible full-screen 3D dungeons, the adjustment to a completely different genre wasn't a tough transition for Naka. "RPGs at the time really weren't that hard to make," explains the veteran programmer. "Really, I think action games were a lot harder to make, to make sure that you got the proper feel of the game, and you didn't want the frame rate dropping too much, so to be able





» [Master System] The differing climates of each planet ensure that you're always sure of your location.

MEET THE STARS

Learn about the heroes and villains of this RPG



Alis

■ Our heroine, whose brother was cruelly slain by King Lassic's forces. She's headstrong and determined to carry out her brother Nero's dying wish – that she force Lassic from power by killing him. Her quest becomes a prominent part of the series mythology.



Myau

■ This cat-like chap is not only pretty talkative, in spite of his appearance, he is a surprisingly skilled fighter who sticks by Odin through thick and thin. Of course, this particular trait can land both of them in more hot water than they'd like.



Odin

■ Odin is your standard issue big muscular warrior, and a long-standing enemy of the tyrannical King Lassic. He and Myau travelled together until Odin tried to fight Medusa, resulting in the hulking warrior being turned completely to stone.



Noah

■ This somewhat frail and androgynous wizard isn't the easiest guy to get along with, flat-out refusing to provide you with any help until the governor of his home planet Motavia requests it. However, he's worth having around as he's a very powerful magic user.

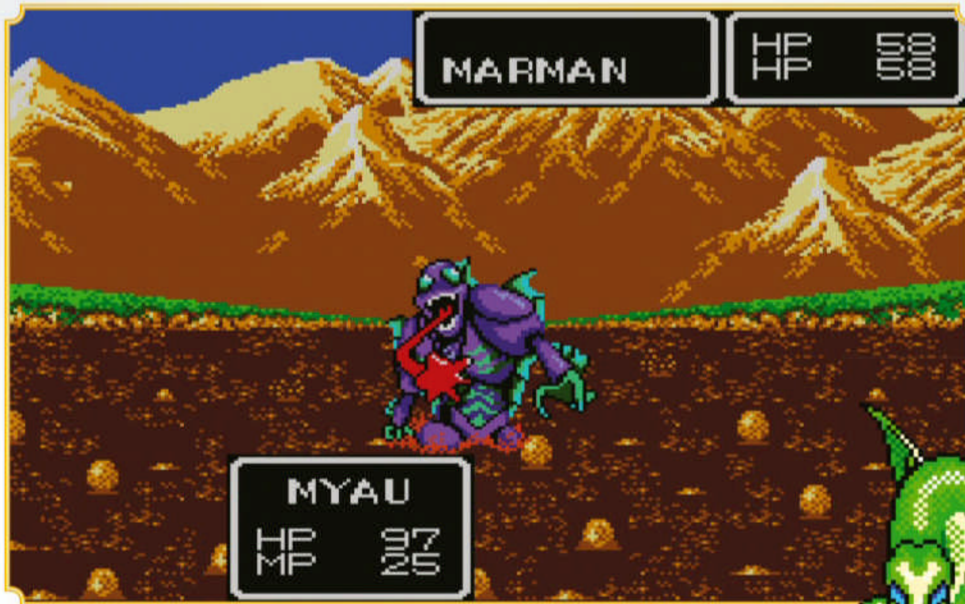
> **"At the time, we didn't have a lot of games with a female character as the lead"**
> Yuji Naka

to maintain that was a challenge. With action games, I really focused on how the user experience was. With RPGs, there wasn't such an issue in that sense so my focus was really on the technical side." It makes sense – with simple movement around world maps and turn-based, menu-driven combat, having limited hardware wouldn't prove too much of an issue.

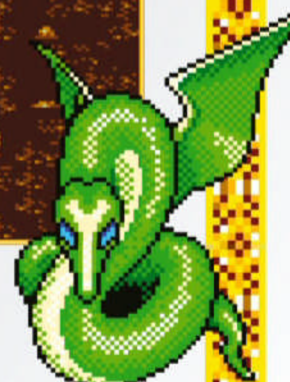
The technical issues proved much more of a headache, with the most notable concerning a problem with the cartridge's battery-backed RAM save system. "There's a game called *Dragon Quest* that was popular in Japan at the time. The RAM was broken, and in our game it also was," recalls Naka. "Due to the hardware noise, the data often got corrupted – when you powered the machine on or off, it caused some kind of interference." In early previews, it seemed that Sega would get around the problem by offering both battery and password saves, but this feature was scrapped. A far more elegant solution was put into place instead.

"What I did was create a backup of the backup, so you'd get an error message that told you that your data had been corrupted, and after a couple of prompts you'd get a message saying that your data had been restored," Naka explains. "I can't say for certain that it fixed everyone's problems. But with *Dragon Quest*, because they didn't have a backup feature, if you'd spent 30 hours plus in the game and for whatever reason the save data was corrupted, that was it. Seeing a message saying that your data had been repaired was a massive relief, and the core fans appreciated it."

While Naka developed the technology, the story of the game was being derived from Chieko Aoki's initial ideas. In *World Of Phantasy Star*, Aoki's former colleagues described her as having a great attachment to the world and story of the game, which she had been working on prior to the call to develop an RPG. As a result of that passion, almost all of the dialogue was already written when the original story draft was put together. Because the whole team shared a single office, Naka remembers the creation of the story well.



» [Master System] Multiple enemies are denoted by the presence of multiple HP bars, but only one is shown.



It was all done on a huge scale. What we were trying to do was to create something on such a scale in a sci-fi setting, and it was heavily inspired by *Star Wars*," Naka recalls. Indeed, one of the game's distinctive features was the decision to mix sci-fi elements with the high fantasy tropes that had been a staple of the genre since *Dungeons & Dragons*. The main cast was clad in traditional armour and used traditional close-quarters weapons, as well as magic. However, the story took place on an interplanetary scale – initially planned for four planets before being cut down to three due to memory constraints – with dome-shaped buildings, advanced vehicles and futuristic police clearly inspired by the stormtroopers of *Star Wars*.

Despite any external influences, *Phantasy Star* had a distinct identity of its own. "I'm proud that we managed to keep it very original," says Naka. One of the key differentiating features was the choice of protagonist. "With the first game the main character was a female – at the time, we didn't have a lot of games with a female character as the main character, which makes it a unique experience." There was no ambiguity to Alis' status. She was front and centre on the cover art and it was her quest to avenge her brother Nero's death that drove the plot of the game, which initially centred on bringing down the tyrannical King Lassic until you learn who or what is actually pulling the strings behind the scenes. Using a female protagonist wasn't the only unusual choice the team made. While the warrior Odin and wizard Noah are fairly common character designs, Myau represents a major departure from the norm – he's ▶



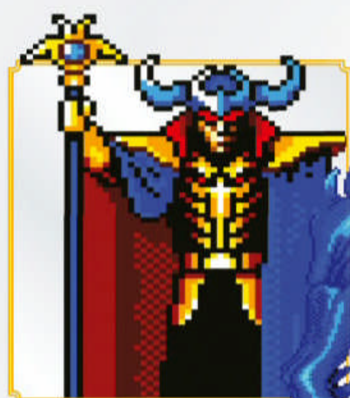
Dr Mad

■ This aptly-named scientist is no friend of PETA – he's heavily into performing experiments on animals, and he doesn't mind whether they live or die at the end. With that in mind, you'd be wise not to let him anywhere near Myau.



Medusa

■ This fearsome creature guards the powerful Laconian Axe, a strong weapon which would be invaluable in your fight against Lassic. Unfortunately, like the Greek legend, Medusa also has a gaze that will turn you to stone, as she did to Odin.



King Lassic

■ The ruler of the Algol system was once a kind and benevolent leader, but in recent years he has transformed into a cruel and ruthless dictator, crushing all resistance with his signature robotic cops. His change of attitude is unexplained, making him your first target.



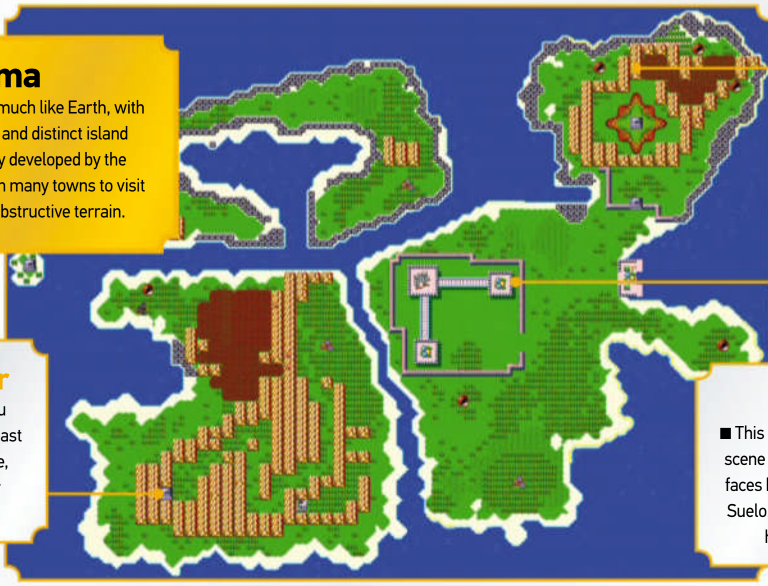
Dark Falz

■ The embodiment of pure evil itself, Dark Falz rarely reveals itself outright, preferring to blend into society by possessing the powerful in order to do its bidding. This abominable creature would become the primary antagonist throughout the *Phantasy Star* series.



HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO ALGOL

Key places to visit as you travel around Phantasy Star's galaxy



Palma

■ Alis' home planet is much like Earth, with vast bodies of water and distinct island continents. It's highly developed by the standards of Algol, with many towns to visit and relatively little obstructive terrain.

Naula Cave

■ This cave is home to the world's least-conveniently located cake shop – it's many floors down and you've got to survive countless monster attacks to reach it.

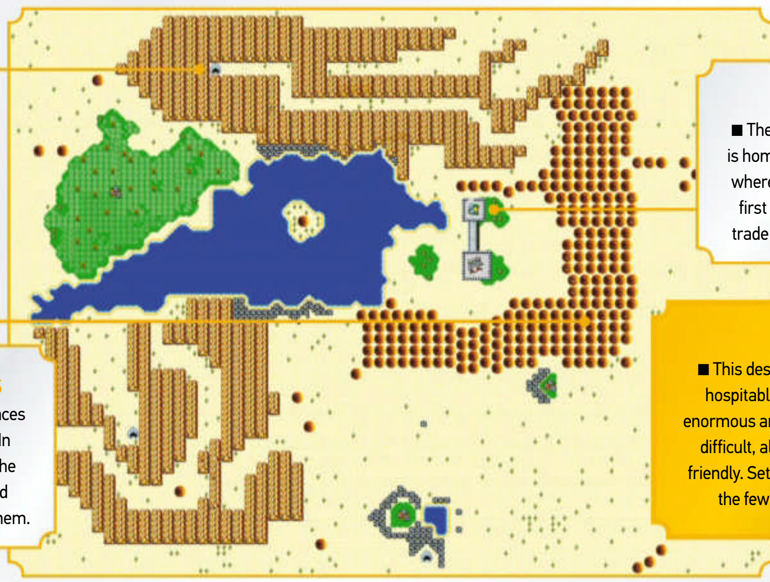
Medusa's Tower

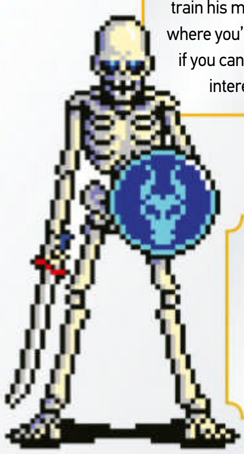
■ This is where to head if you want to take revenge on the beast for turning poor Odin to stone, just don't forget your Mirror Shield – it's essential!

Camineet

■ This is Alis' home town, and the scene of Nero's murder. Friendly faces here will aid you, including Suelo, who offers essential free healing at her house.







Maharu Cave

■ Noah has exiled himself here to train his magical powers, and it's where you'll recruit him – but only if you can prove the governor's interest in your quest.

Paseo

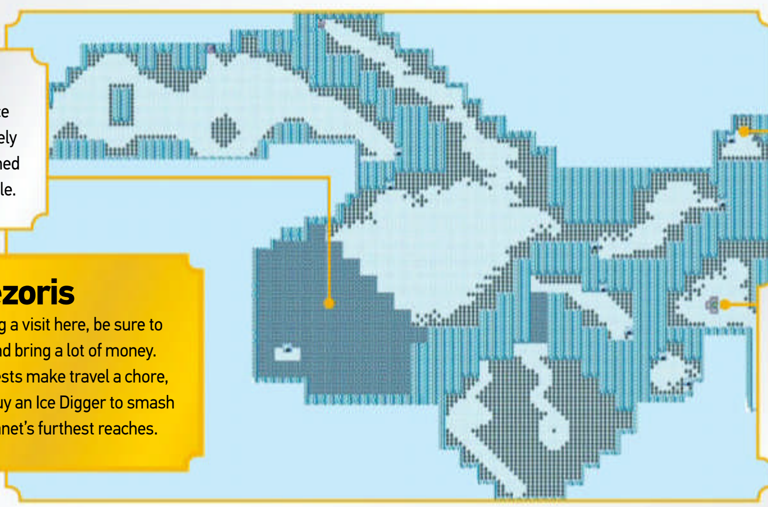
■ The largest town on Motavia is home to the governor, and it's where you'll meet Myau – your first party member, who you trade for some pottery (really).

Antlion Fields

■ If you try to cross these places by foot, you'll be attacked. In order to access the rest of the planet, you'll need the Land Master vehicle to drive over them.

Motavia

■ This desert planet isn't tremendously hospitable to humans, being home to enormous antlion colonies that make travel difficult, although native Motavians are friendly. Settlements are clustered around the few fertile areas of the planet.



Ice Plains

■ Enormous formations of ice make the tower here completely inaccessible until you've obtained the awesome Ice Digger vehicle.

Twintown

■ Everyone on the left half of town claims that the right are liars, and vice versa. It's up to you to learn which Dezorians are peddling alternative facts!

Dezoris

■ If you're planning a visit here, be sure to wrap up warm and bring a lot of money. Mountains and forests make travel a chore, and you'll need to buy an Ice Digger to smash through to the planet's furthest reaches.

Skure

■ The only Palman immigrant town on Dezoris is worth visiting for both the Wand and the Laser Gun, two very useful pieces of equipment.





» [Master System] Dragons are amongst the game's toughest enemies, but usually attack alone.

▶ a talking cat-like creature capable of learning strong defensive magic.

Phantasy Star was released in Japan on 20th December 1987, just two days after Square released *Final Fantasy* on the Famicom. Reception to the game was near universally positive, not least because Sega got a translation out to Western audiences in November 1988, well before the likes of *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* had been localised for NES owners. US magazine *Electronic Games* awarded the game a "Direct Hit" in its review, opining that it "may usher in a new era in home videogaming". C*omputer & Video Games* was a rare dissenting voice, and the sticking point wasn't the game itself. In a 75% review, Paul Glancey explained that his problem laid with the game's pricing: "My only reservation about recommending it is its monumental price tag – 40 quid seems a lot to pay."

It was a fair comment – the console itself was only £79.99 at the time. However, this high price point wasn't unique to the UK market, as the game was also the most expensive game for the console in Japan at ¥6,000, and in the US at $69.99. The high price was driven by three key factors: first, the four megabit cartridge was unusually large by Master System standards, with *Phantasy Star* only the second game to use that much memory (the first being *After Burner*). Secondly, there was the added cost of battery-backed RAM – an extra that had thus far only been used on games of two megabits or below. Lastly, a chip shortage in Japan affected both Nintendo and Sega during 1988, preventing the price from being lowered.


» [Master System] Gaining your own spaceship allows you to visit all three planets of Algol freely.

"It's a project that's dear to my heart but we were always so busy with other projects"
Yuji Naka

The price tag didn't prevent *Phantasy Star* from becoming a beloved game, and the first of a multitude of sequels quickly went into production for the Master System. However, *Phantasy Star II* ended up being repositioned as a key title to drive sales of the brand-new 16-bit Mega Drive hardware. This would retain the sci-fi themes and many of the same staff, but lost the 3D dungeons and focused on a new cast. The team would drift apart through the Mega Drive years, as Yuji Naka, Naoto Oshima and Rieko Kodama were pulled away by the success of *Sonic The Hedgehog*. Kodama would return to codirect the final Mega Drive instalment *Phantasy Star IV*, but the series fell dormant after that. In 2000, Naka served as the producer for *Phantasy Star Online*, a revival which leaned more on the sci-fi elements of the series and shifted to an action-based combat system, as well as pioneering online RPGs on consoles. This would become the template for modern games in the series, and *Phantasy Star Online 2* is still active today.

As for the original, demand has kept the price high over the years – you'll be lucky to find it for less than its original asking price. However, Sega has kept it available over the years as a result of that high demand. A special Mega Drive rerelease of the original was issued in Japan in 1994, and *Phantasy Star* compilations were released for the Saturn, Game Boy Advance and PlayStation 2, although only the GBA version saw a Western release. The game was also released for the Wii Virtual Console worldwide, and appeared as a bonus game on the *Sega Mega Drive Ultimate Collection* compilation for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3.

However, when we ask Naka how he feels about having created such a beloved game, his response is focused on unrealised potential rather than what he and the team did achieve. "With *Phantasy Star*, it's a project that's dear to my heart but we were always so busy with other projects – for example, *Sonic The Hedgehog*. I feel like looking back now, had I spent more time creating *Phantasy Star* content, maybe it would be bigger than it is now. Of course, the *Phantasy Star Online* series is out there now and still doing really well."

It's a typical response from a developer who'd prefer to strive for success rather than rest on his laurels, but there's much to celebrate about *Phantasy Star*. It's a game that challenged the existing conventions of RPGs by featuring unusual settings and characters, and it introduced a generation of Western players to the emerging JRPG scene. Add to that the fact that it's not just one of the best Master System games, but one of the very best games of its era, and it's easy to see why the game has remained relevant for decades. ★



LOST IN TRANSLATION

Why did fans translate this game into English a second time?

As the first Japanese RPG to gain prominence in the West, *Phantasy Star*'s localisation was pioneering, but far from perfect. Part of the problem was that the game was designed to display Japanese characters, and rather than reprogramming the game to allow for the greater number of characters that an English translation would ideally require, the localisation programmers truncated the script to fit the engine. You can see this in menu items like 'ATTK' – a word for which four characters are sufficient in Japanese but not English.

As a result, a team of programmers from SMS Power got together to retranslate the original game into English, and released their efforts in 2008. The engine was modified to better suit English text, featuring more lines of dialogue per screen for a more nuanced translation. Additionally, the retranslation undoes some localisation changes (Odin and Noah are known as Tylon and Lutz here), and restores the enhanced FM soundtrack that was cut from the Western game.



» [Master System] A stern warning is given in the original translation of the game.





AMSTRAD CPC 6128

The CPC 6128 was Amstrad's follow-up to the 464. Out went cassettes, in came three-inch disks, 64k RAM and a new look. Sugar meant business! Al 'Xyphoe' White takes a look at some lost classics

MEGABLASTERS

■ DEVELOPER: **ODIESOFT** ■ YEAR: **1994**

■ Who doesn't like Bomberman? He's been around since the early Eighties with many sequels and versions released over the years, and he's recently returned once more onto Nintendo's new console, the Switch. The games generally follow a very simple formula – what if you took *Pac-Man* but instead of running away from ghosts you could drop bombs and blow them up? Added to that you could destroy walls, and replacing the power pills was a whole range of various power-ups. Given the single-screen simplicity it's surprising that the CPC – where scrolling wasn't a real issue and with all those lovely colours available – didn't see a version or clone of the classic game. That is until Odiesoft emerged with the mighty *Megablasters* late into the commercial life of the machine, and boy was it worth the wait!

Taking control of Bob and Bart, who both look like a discoloured *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* emoji, you have to bomb your way around ten different worlds – each with their own secret and bonus levels to find, each guarded by a giant boss. It's massive! Over four sides of two dual-sided disks there's nearly 1MB of data, which back then was a staggering amount when you consider most computers had 64KB of RAM. The graphics are joyously colourful with smooth sprite movement and no slowdown. Lovely music plays throughout, and, with the overall presentation, *Megablasters* is simply a pleasure from start to finish.

The backstory of Bob and Bart is rather long and silly so it's best you just dive straight into the action. *Bomberman* fans won't be disappointed to find a large overscan playing area and a huge range of power-ups available, plus there's now an energy bar meaning you won't die and immediately lose a life from an enemy or your own explosions. The game is tough enough already, and if you want to progress it will require patience rather than running around like a lunatic dropping bombs willy-nilly! The best part, though, is the four-player battles which can be achieved with a splitter for two joysticks, with the other two players hunched over the keyboard fighting for space. In fact, these multiplayer wars are probably the best fun you'll ever have on a CPC.

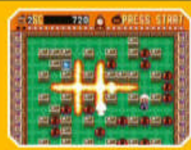
A computer's best work often tends to come long after its commercial life, where budding bedroom programmers growing up with the machine have spent years unlocking coding secrets and tricks. At this point in time the 16-bit consoles ruled the roost, and there was an effort to compete and get versions of the big games like *Mario*, *Sonic*, et al onto the ageing 8-bit computers. *Megablasters* is arguably the best conversion or clone of one of those big 16-bit games. This game is deservedly highly regarded; just take a visit to the main Amstrad fansite the 'CPC Wiki' and look for its 'Top Games' article – this is the top 100 games compiled from review scores of all the old Amstrad magazines and current review sites, and you'll find that *Megablasters* currently sits at the top spot with a whopping 98% rating. We, too, would agree that this is probably the best game on the Amstrad.



» [Amstrad CPC 6128] The first boss that you encounter. It's that Snake who's escaped from those old Nokia phones!

IF YOU LIKE THIS TRY...

SUPER BOMBERMAN
SNES



■ There's been so many different *Bomberman* games released, but we went with the first in a series of games released on the SNES that made the franchise so popular. This was the release that really exploded into the public consciousness and for many the first *Bomberman* game they ever played. Superb.

BATMAN
PC ENGINE



■ We could have chosen something obvious like *Pac-Man*, but instead check out this curiosity from Sunsoft. The team had the *Batman* licence, but instead of making it a platformer or beat-'em-up for the PC Engine, it opted instead to swap bombs for Batarangs in a *Bomberman*-inspired game.

PSYCHO PIGS UXB
AMSTRAD CPC



■ Based on a little-known arcade game called *Butasan*, this was also single-screen but with all the walls removed. It also had cute little pigs running around picking up and throwing bombs, and causing carnage on a massive scale. The game's also notable for its advert that got US Gold into trouble for sexism.

IN DEPTH



POWER-UPS
■ There are many items to find after blowing up destructible walls in the game. Most will increase your explosive ability, others, like this egg timer icon, freeze all enemies.

BONUS LEVELS
■ Not only are there secret levels (and a whole secret world if you can find it!), but collect all the 'BONUS' letters and a level full of power-ups awaits you before the boss.

ENEMIES
■ There's a wide variety of baddies chasing you, and each level introduces a new one. This little dinosaur hides under a bush until fire singes the leaves and unleashes him.

THE MAD BOMBER
■ This is Bob, our hero. Bob has just unleashed some serious firepower, and lucky for him he's just found a hidden entrance to a secret level! There's at least one in each world.

Minority Report

FRES FIGHTER II TURBO

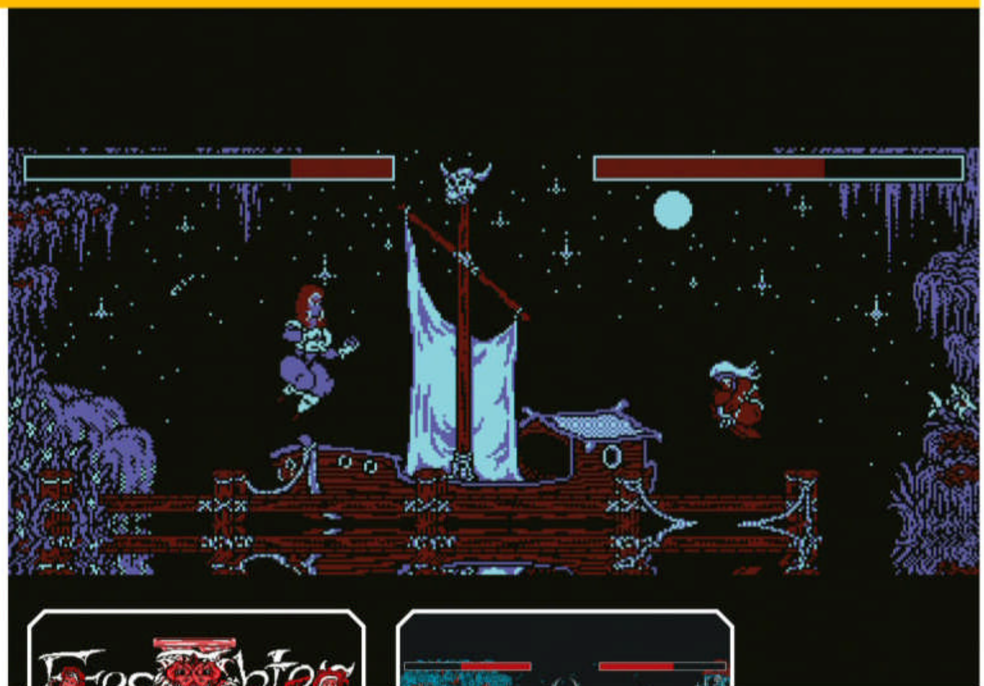
■ PUBLISHER: **BOLLAWARE** ■ YEAR: **1999**

■ Ask any Amstrad owner what game they were desperate to get released on their CPC in the early Nineties and inevitably their answer would be *Street Fighter II*. US Gold made regular promises that the Amstrad version was coming, with magazine *Amstrad Action* further torturing CPC users with monthly updates. The game never arrived, and thousands of Amstrad owners admitted defeat and went on to get a SNES or some other newfangled machine.

The developers Doc Barthoc and Sigurd Fauser of Bollaware, talented coders and veterans of the public domain scene, refused to admit defeat. They set off to make their own version, and came up with the stupidly and obviously named *Fres Fighter II Turbo*.

The results are stunning. Starting off with probably the best intro sequence ever seen on an Amstrad, the menu has a wealth of options from 16-player battles, plus arcade, championship and survival modes. There's six characters to play as, each with one unique special move – Vanessa (a sporty Sonja Blade type), Walker (a beast on two limbs and a nod to Blanka), Shamane (an Amazonian), Bones (a skeleton with a deadly ball and chain on his ankle), F. Sumo (a fat sumo wrestler and a very obvious E. Honda clone), and finally Justine who, most surprisingly of all, is a nun. The fighting locations all have their own 'special effect', from the graveyard with rain and lightning, to the impressive jungle harbour with shimmering and reflecting water in real time.

SFII fans might be put off by the slower fighting pace, and some smutty nudity is regrettable, regardless this is quite simply the best one-on-one beat-'em-up on the Amstrad.





» [Amstrad CPC 6128] The graphics are quite detailed being done in the higher resolution 'Mode 1' of the CPC.



» [Amstrad CPC 6128] A graveyard with a thunder and lightning storm lashing down is the lair of Bones, a skeleton with a lethal ball and chain.

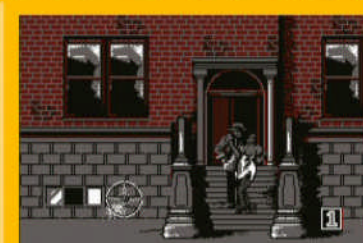
MORE GAMES TO PLAY



» THE ADDAMS FAMILY

■ DEVELOPER: **OCEAN SOFTWARE**
■ YEAR: **1991**

■ Ocean surprised many at the time by releasing only one 128k game, which turned out to be its final Amstrad release. It's a cracking platformer to go out on, though, and once you realise the sheer size of the game it's no wonder it had no choice but to use that extra memory. Gomez has to rescue each family member imprisoned around his dangerous mansion. Spooky kooky fun.



» PROHIBITION

■ DEVELOPER: **INFOGRAMES**
■ YEAR: **1987**

■ Based closely on *Empire City 1931*, a little known coin-op, *Prohibition* is a fast-paced shooting gallery game. An arrow guides you to gangsters popping out of windows, doorways, alleys, etc. giving you only a few seconds to shoot them. Thankfully, you have a *Time Crisis*-style duck mechanic to use. Detailed graphics, ultra smooth scrolling and excellent music complete the package. A cut-down 64k version also exists.



» SUPER CAULDRON

■ DEVELOPER: **TITUS SOFTWARE**
■ YEAR: **1993**

■ Released alongside Elmar Krieger's other Amstrad classic *Prehistorik 2* was the belated, but spellbinding, third game in the *Cauldron* series. For CPC fans it was definitely worth the wait, with the Speccy and C64 for once being the ones missing out. Stunning graphics and fun gameplay finds your cute little witch leaping and flying around casting spells. A cassette version exists, but is extremely rare.



» ZAP 'T' BALLS

■ DEVELOPER: **ELMSOFT**
■ YEAR: **1992**

■ It's that man Elmar Krieger again, and his first big release was this *Pang* clone. Frustrated that the official game only appeared for the Amstrad GX4000 and Plus machines, he set out on a mission to prove that he could do a better version for the normal CPC. Whilst it doesn't beat the official *Pang* conversion, *Zap* differentiates itself with more puzzle elements introduced, so our advice would be to enjoy both games.

B.A.T.

■ DEVELOPER: UBI SOFT ■ YEAR: 1991

■ As a futuristic secret agent of B.A.T. (Bureau Of Astral Troubleshooters) you're on a highly dangerous mission to track down various criminals and aliens. You have ten days to stop all life on the sleazy planet of Selenia being wiped out, thus avoiding Earth sliding into all out war. If you've ever fancied diving into a *Blade Runner*-esque cyberpunk adventure game with RPG elements then you'll be in your element here! There are all manner of creatures for you to interact with, some only appearing at a set time and place with the clock ticking down in real time.

B.A.T. is presented using static screens with cartoon-style panels for certain areas. Moving your pointer lets you interact with characters and locations, while pop-up menus give you a variety of options. Fights are determined by your health level and how quickly you can click on your enemy. Casual gamers will find making progress daunting, and RPG veterans will be disappointed with the limited character development. However there's plenty of gorgeous locations and NPC's to interact, barter and fight with.

A point-and-click adventure is something of a rarity on the CPC, and this one goes all out! Covering a massive four sides of two disks, this made it a very expensive package at the time and as a result it's now extremely rare.



» [Amstrad CPC 6128] Interactions with characters can often lead to disagreements and a duel to the death with laser pistols. Be fast on that trigger!



RETRO STINKER

» ESWAT

■ DEVELOPER: US GOLD ■ YEAR: 1990

■ A dreadful conversion with graphics that look like a toddler's had a temper tantrum with their Lego. The 128k version doubles the screen and sprite height, thus doubling the eyesore.



» XYPHOES FANTASY

■ DEVELOPER: SILMARILS
■ YEAR: 1991

■ This is your correspondent's namesake! Possibly the most visually stunning game on the Amstrad with outstanding presentation throughout and digitised music on the intro and ending sequences. Gameplay is a horizontally-scrolling shoot-'em-up fare, first on-foot and then rather spectacularly on horse back. There's also two *Barbarian*-inspired levels which cheekily include the head chop decapitation move!



» FINAL FIGHT

■ DEVELOPER: US GOLD
■ YEAR: 1991

■ Comparing the CPC version to the arcade original is like watching a slide show of holiday snaps – sure they look nice, but you'd rather be actually there. The CPC has colourful large sprites and backdrops that look like the arcade, but it's so very very slow! Regardless, it's still a decent beat-'em-up in its own right, and an admirable attempt at cramming the massive coin-op onto a humble 8-bit home computer like the 6128.



» SID MEIER'S PIRATES!

■ DEVELOPER: MICROPROSE SOFTWARE
■ YEAR: 1987

■ Sid Meier was one of the first developers to have their name prominently displayed on the game's front cover. *Pirates!* was huge at the time, both in popularity and the sheer size of the actual game, with the manual alone being a staggering 91 pages! It looks daunting at first, but the sheer amount of fun it offers, from sailing to swordfighting, can't be underestimated.



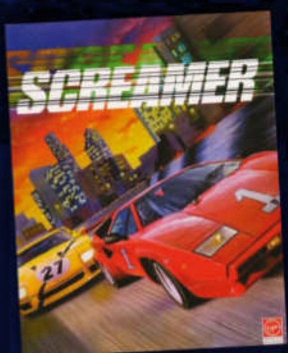
» DOUBLE DRAGON II

■ DEVELOPER: VIRGIN GAMES
■ YEAR: 1989

■ Confusion exists around *Double Dragon II* on the CPC, with two versions released of both the original and the sequel. Most people sadly only came across the mostly rubbish 64k versions, but the disk releases from coding ace Richard Aplin are fantastic. Slightly messy graphics aside, this is a surprisingly accurate arcade conversion, arguably the best of all the 8-bit systems. Just don't get the poor cassette version by mistake!

SCRE

Screamer is remembered as the cutting-edge Nineties PC game that gave arcade and console racers a run for their money. Mike Bevan looks behind the scenes of this super-fast racer from the home of Fiat and Alfa Romeo…



IN THE KNOW

- » **PUBLISHER:** VIRGIN INTERACTIVE
- » **DEVELOPER:** GRAFFITI
- » **RELEASED:** 1995
- » **PLATFORM:** PC, MAC
- » **GENRE:** RACING

The early Nineties was a halcyon era for the racing game. From sprite-based Eighties arcade releases such as *Chase HQ* and *Out Run* and primitive 3D games such as Atari's *Hard Drivin'*, a revolution in graphics hardware saw the arrival of a new thrilling breed of coin-op titles. Sega's seminal *Virtua Racing* set a new standard for arcade racers in 1992, and was followed a year later by Namco's *Ridge Racer* and Sega's *Daytona USA*, games which set new benchmarks in realism with their vibrant, fully texture-mapped 3D graphics and incredible fast-paced onscreen action. While gamers waited for the new generation of consoles, the PlayStation and Saturn, and their upcoming home versions of these titles, the only way to experience them was to join the inevitable queue of virtual Prosts and Schumachers at the local arcade. However, over in the Italian city of Milan, a recently formed game developer called Graffiti was about to change all that.

The game that would effectively turn PCs into an arcade-style racing cabinet began life as an experiment into 3D graphics technology. "To be honest it was merely a commercial idea," says programmer Ivan



» [PC] *Screamer's* solid course design and excellent AI ensured that races were always fast and, dare we say it, furious.



» [PC] Don't worry about it, that will buff right out.

Del Duca. "After finishing *Iron Assault* (a robot combat game published by Virgin Interactive) we started to develop our full software 3D engine, mainly thanks to one of our team members who was a genius in the field of computer graphics, Antonio Martini. While 3D games are today a standard even on low-cost mobile devices, this wasn't true back then. Very successful and acclaimed games like *Doom* or *Duke Nukem* weren't using a full-3D engine but rather an evolution of the 3D ray casting approach found in games like *Wolfenstein*. We believed that our engine was pretty impressive so we built a sci-fi-themed demo and showed it to some publishers, trying to get funding for our next game. At Virgin they were amazed by the demo and they rushed us to sign a contract; not for a sci-fi game, though, they wanted us to use our engine as the foundation of a racing game that, a few months later, became *Screamer*."

In a time before the prevalence of affordable 3D accelerated graphic cards, Graffiti's game engine was rendered entirely by software. This would mean that the game needed a particularly high-end PC to get the best performance out of it, preferably one with the recently

AMER



» [PC] Power-sliding round a bend in the Tiger, *OutRun 2* style.



SCREAMER 101

■ As its name implies, *Screamer* is an ultra-fast, action-packed racer in the mould of Nineties arcade favourites like *Daytona USA* and *Ridge Racer*. It's a game where high-octane thrills, uncanny drifting and ridiculous airborne crashes are favoured over realism, all of which add much to its appeal. With six distinct tracks and six main drivable vehicles based on real-life supercars, *Screamer* made good use of 3D texture-mapped graphics, and on its release was one of the best looking PC racers around.

available, but rather pricey Pentium processor. "The 3D engine was quite tricky," recalls coder Simone Balestra. "The engine was entirely written in assembler with self-modifying code to address the lack of hardware registers. In *SVGA* [the game] was obviously slower since there were four times the amount of pixels to compute. Furthermore, the RAM mounted on the video cards was very slow so there was an additional bottleneck generated by that." On the right machine though, *Screamer* looked the business, and was miles beyond pretty much anything else yet available on the PC or consoles. With its beautiful, fully texture-mapped tracks involving tunnels, banked curves, suspension bridges, canyons and other stunning scenery, it was as if Graffiti had managed to squeeze a mini-replica of *Ridge Racer* and *Daytona* onto a machine more commonly associated with spreadsheets than fast 3D graphics.

The cutting-edge technology behind Screamer meant that coding it wasn't exactly plain sailing, with Ivan telling us, "There were many problems… bear in mind that we were a small Italian team without connections to other developers. The internet wasn't there, there was no Windows and almost no documentation on anything, so basically we had to find our own way through the development of a triple-A game. But since *Screamer* had been developed prior to the existence of hardware rendering, we never thought about benefits or hindrances. It was just normal for us to write a software renderer. The settings were inspired by real-life locations but the topology of the tracks and environments were invented by our artists."

Grafitti's 3D software renderer allowed for some impressive next-generation effects, such as the inclusion of night versions of each of the courses complete with glowing background neon lighting, and reflections on the cars from clouds, skyscrapers and other objects. The team also took the opportunity to showcase their 3D engine and accompanying box of graphical tricks with a nifty post-race replay system. And while not having any licensing to include real-life cars in the game, ▶

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

IRON ASSUALT
SYSTEM: PC, PC-98
YEAR: 1995

SCREAMER 2
SYSTEM: PC/MAC
YEAR: 1996

SUPERBIKE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP
SYSTEM: PC
YEAR: 1999

RIDE 2
SYSTEM: PS4, XBOX ONE, PC
YEAR: 2016

ROARING RACERS

Other games that put the pedal to the metal on PC

THE NEED FOR SPEED 1995



■ The original release in Electronic Arts' franchise hit shelves in the same year as *Screamer*. More geared towards being a realistic simulation than an arcade racer, *NFS* featured a range of real-life supercars and plenty of now-signature police chases.

DESTRUCTION DERBY 1995



■ For those whose tastes tended more towards demolition than driving finesse came this vehicular equivalent of a pub punch-up from Psygnosis. There's not more much to it than racing around a handful of rather limited arenas crashing into stuff.

DAYTONA USA 1996



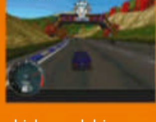
■ A stalwart of the Nineties arcade, along with *Ridge Racer*, Sega's classic racer was a huge influence on driving games for the decade and beyond. The PC port is disappointing, though, lacking the variety and larger number of tracks and cars of *Screamer*.

SCREAMER 2 1996



■ Graffiti's sequel moved away from the fast, shorter *Ridge Racer*-style circuits of its predecessor towards gameplay more reminiscent of *Sega Rally*. The handling is largely improved, with a greater emphasis on drift-oriented driving.

COLIN MCRAE RALLY 1998



■ One of the first successful attempts at a Rally simulation game, *CMR* featured a range of vehicles and drivers from the 1998 *World Rally Championship* season and an exceptionally realistic driving model for its day. True to life, the game focussed on time trials.

▶ the Graffiti designers cunningly based the six main drivable vehicles in *Screamer* on some of the most exciting supercars of the time, including the Porsche 911 Turbo, Lamborghini Diablo, Ferrari F40 and Bugatti EB 110. Each car was available with either automatic or manual transmission, with different liveries for each version, and varying handling characteristics approximate to its real-life counterpart.

While *Screamer* sought to emulate the high-speed thrills of the hit arcade racers of the Nineties, with its emphasis on power-drifting and making time checkpoints with precious seconds to spare, the team realised that more needed to be added to the game to ensure long-term appeal. The Championship League gave players the chance to take part in a longer, more open-ended experience, while other fun distractions included Time Attack and Slalom modes, and even a minigame where you had to knock down as many traffic cones as possible. "These modes were only available on the first *Screamer*," says Ivan. "I think that they were a request from our producer at Virgin but I have to admit that we had a good amount of fun implementing them!"



» [PC] *Screamer*'s excellent cockpit view was further testament to the clever coding the game featured.

> "We weren't aware that Need For Speed existed until it came out in the stores"
> Ivan Del Duca

Sound-wise the game did a pretty good job of representing the grunt of its supercharged vehicles, while an American NASCAR-style commentator provided a running narration as well as admonishing you for any particularly bad examples of driving. "I remember that I gave my own voice to the first version of the in-game commentator using a lot of catchphrases that we were using and joking about daily at the office," Ivan chuckles. "The result was hilarious, at least until we erroneously sent our custom voiceover to Virgin… They weren't that amused…"

We ask if the team were aware of or actively competing with the Electronic Arts racing game *Need For Speed* during the production of *Screamer*. "Not really," Ivan replies. "Maybe it concerned Virgin but we developers weren't even aware that *Need For Speed* existed before it came out in the stores, a few months before *Screamer*." When Grafitti's game was released, though, it offered the kind of colourful, fast-paced arcade racing experience that *Need For Speed*'s more sim-oriented approach couldn't match, receiving plenty of rave reviews from the gaming press. Future's US-based *Maximum PC* awarded the game five out of five stars, heaping praise on its graphics, speed, car count, replay system and longevity due to its varied in-game modes. And if you happened to already have a fast Pentium PC, picking up the game was certainly a lot less expensive than getting hold of a copy of Namco's newly released *Ridge Racer* and a launch-price European PlayStation console.

SCREAM MACHINES

The main six cars in the game are all based on real-life vehicles

PANTHER



MAX SPEED 329 KPH
GRIP
ACCELERATION

■ This great little all-rounder is probably the most recognisable vehicle in *Screamer*, being based on the Porsche 911 Turbo. Its may not be the best handling car in the game, but it boasts superb acceleration and excellent traction.

YANKEE



MAX SPEED 343 KPH
GRIP
ACCELERATION

■ Inspired by the Chevrolet Corvette C4, The Yankee is very fast, but, like a lot of American muscle cars, it seems to have a little bit of a problem doing anything but going in a straight line. Its acceleration is also not too hot.

RISING SUN



MAX SPEED 324 KPH
GRIP
ACCELERATION

■ This Japanese power drifter is derived from the Mitsubishi GTO (aka Mitsubishi GT3000) and is a bit of a pocket rocket in being able to out-accelerate every other car in the game. The downside is that it's very prone to spins.



» [PC] You're going to have to work a lot harder if you actually want to place first.

After completing their debut racer, the Grafitti team went straight into developing its sequel, *Screamer 2*, doubling the amount of main drivable cars from the original to 12, and performing various handling tweaks that gave the game a more rally-oriented feel. The game also added a split-screen, two-player mode and support for 3D graphics cards. Grafitti's last title in the franchise, *Screamer Rally*, continued the off-road theme and placed more emphasis on variation of track surfaces, including mud, snow and sand and the simulation of features like bumps and potholes.



» [PC] Jostling our way through a tunnel in the Rising Sun.

Both sequels, again, received a great reception from PC gaming magazines of the time, which praised the new-and-improved handling models, graphics and course design. "Despite the hard work we had a lot of fun making the original *Screamer*," remembers Ivan. "We had about ten people for ten months on the project, working 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week. We were young and we could cope with that kind of pressure and hard work but the experience left us exhausted and some team members left as a consequence of that. The production of *Screamer 2* was much more streamlined. It took about a year with a team of 12 people. *Screamer Rally* took only five months with a very small team, and while it was probably the most memorable among the trilogy, it was actually a data disk for *Screamer 2* with new tracks, new music and a new interface. The game code was almost the same."

"On *Screamer 2*, car handling and tuning was without doubt the hardest part of the development," remembers the sequel's lead programmer, Stefano Lecchi. "The physics simulation was pretty advanced for that time, but having to make it fun to play wasn't an easy job. We wanted each car to have its own specific handling and personality despite the limited hardware capabilities. It was a lot of work, especially on the rear-drive cars that kept overturning on several tracks… But, overall, I don't remember anything that couldn't be added. Usually ideas for features came during the night or on the bus and once in the office were immediately discussed and prototyped. Everything was *very* agile…"

Grafitti was rebranded in 1996, with *Screamer 2* becoming the first game to be published under its new moniker, Milestone. The Milan-based developer has since become known for a series of motorsport-themed game titles over the years, including *Alfa Romeo Racing Italiano*, *Corvette GT Evolution*, *WRC 3* and *WRC 4*, *Superbike World Championship*, *MotoGP*, and *Ride*. Virgin did make one last attempt to revive the *Screamer* franchise with the Noughties off-road racer *Screamer 4x4*, although Milestone was not involved, the game being created by Hungarian outfit Clever's Development. In recent years, Milestone has moved from supercars and rally off-roading to the joys of two wheels, with its latest release being suberbike racing game *Ride 2*. But the Italian studio still acknowledges its *Screamer* series as being a pivotal moment for both the PC racing genre and its own development as a company. And along with Ferrari, Ducati, and Alfa Romeo, it seems it has found its place as an iconic Italian brand with a proven pedigree in tearing up the asphalt. *

Special thanks to Stefano Petrullo for making this article possible.

SHADOW



MAX SPEED 343 KPH
GRIP
ACCELERATION

■ Sporting the unmistakable space-age angles of the Lamborghini Diablo, the Shadow is the fastest regular car in *Screamer*, but just bear in mind it doesn't have the best acceleration if you do come face to face with a wall at 200 mph…

HAMMER



MAX SPEED 336 KPH
GRIP
ACCELERATION

■ The Hammer is a take on the mid-engine Bugatti EB 110, and offers a good compromise between handling and acceleration at the expense of a slightly lower top speed than some of the other supercar-styled vehicles in the game.

TIGER



MAX SPEED 340 KPH
GRIP
ACCELERATION

■ Based on the legendary Ferrari F40, this is the second Italian car in *Screamer*. Speed-wise, the Tiger is very nearly a match for the Shadow and Yankee, and has great handling and acceleration, making it another good all-rounder.

BULLET



MAX SPEED 357 KPH
GRIP
ACCELERATION

■ This secret vehicle can only be unlocked by beating all three leagues in the Championship on Rookie, Amateur and Professional settings. With a massive rocket strapped to its rear, it's stupidly quick and a bit of a cheat vehicle.



MOSAIC PUBLISHING

While the Eighties videogame scene was undoubtedly male-dominated, there was one woman who ran a software house single-handedly, and with great success. Graeme Mason travelled to busy Chiswick to meet her...



» [C64] After deciding to try new ventures in 1988, Vicky sold the *Adrian Mole* licence to Virgin Games which produced this sequel, *Growing Pains Of Adrian Mole.*

It's an Autumnal Saturday lunchtime and Chiswick High Street is teeming with activity. After negotiating multiple junctions and mini roundabouts, and scoring a suitable parking space in a bucolic side street, **Retro Gamer** arrives ten minutes late at the charming coffee shop where we have arranged to meet our interviewee. Her name is Vicky Carne, and we last spoke to the well-spoken Londoner for a Desert Island Discs feature way back in issue 12. We want to talk to her exclusively about the software house she created and ran from 1983 to 1988: Mosaic Publishing. First we offer Vicky an apology for our tardiness and order a coffee. A large one.

The early stages of the 8-bit computer game industry saw a surge in text adventures, with or without graphics. Offering a freedom and complexity unrivalled by most arcade games of the time, the rise of the text adventure was as abrupt as its fall. To begin with, they were often associated with other written media, specifically novels, and one of the first (and most well-known) was Melbourne House's *The Hobbit*, a superb adaptation of the JRR Tolkien fantasy tale. Meanwhile, having worked at magazine publisher Haymarket, Vicky herself had begun collaborating with several small book producers, most notably Sinclair Browne, a small partnership between Sir Clive Sinclair and his friend, Patrick Browne. "They published a variety of fiction and non-fiction," begins Vicky. "But nothing to do with computers, although this was around the time that Sinclair was releasing the ZX81."

> **"We had a series of books on using computers for different jobs"**
> Vicky Carne

With Sinclair's follow up to the ZX81, the ZX Spectrum, becoming a huge hit, the nature of Sinclair Browne's release schedule changed rapidly. "When the Spectrum came out there were suddenly lots of books being published like '150 Games To Program For Your ZX Spectrum,'" says Vicky, "so having been given access to the Sinclair logo, I suggested we do a list of computer books." And so the Sinclair-Browne computer books division was born, with Vicky in charge of finding authors and suitable material.

Despite a shortage of computer-game-related knowledge, Vicky's experience in publishing soon paid dividends thanks to literary agent Richard Gollner. "He was an agent for a lot of people in that sector back in the day, and he introduced me to many writers and programmers," she reveals. One such writer/coder was Tim Hartnell, who had forged a decent reputation in the area, and was soon compiling notable books for Sinclair Browne, such as *The ZX Spectrum Explored* and *Educational Uses For the ZX Spectrum*, the latter tome proving once and for all that it wasn't just for games why we all demanded the Sinclair computer ▶



» [Amstrad CPC] It's early doors in *The Saga Of Erik The Viking*, and there is a tricky river that needs to be negotiated.

INSTANT EXPERT

- Vicky Carne was inspired by Melbourne House's *The Hobbit* to start her company specialising in book adaptations.
- **Vicky was relatively young at 27 years old when she started Mosaic.**
- Surprisingly, Mosaic released just one actual book, and it was gaming-related – 1984's *Beyond The Arcade* by Nicholas Palmer.
- **In addition to its logo, Richard Kelly designed many of Mosaic's excellent game covers.**
- Mosaic published clue sheets to help any gamers that were in trouble.
- **In 1988, Mosaic sold the *Adrian Mole* licence to Virgin, who produced a sequel, *Growing Pains*, again written by Level 9.**
- A game based around the anarchic hit comedy *Not The Nine O'Clock News* was some way into development before being judged unpublishable by Vicky and abandoned.
- **The untimely demise of developer RamJam also meant a C64 version of *Twice Shy* never saw the light of day.**

» Mosaic Publishing was no different to any other publisher when it came to promoting its new games.





TIMELINE

1982 ■ Melbourne House releases *The Hobbit*, the first major and successful graphic adventure, and the inspiration behind Mosaic. Meanwhile, Vicky Carne is working for publisher Sinclair Browne, among others.

1983 **■ Vicky starts Mosaic and begins searching for suitable source material on which to base her first games.**

1984 ■ Mosaic releases its first handful of games: the utility-lite *My Secret Diary*, *The Unorthodox Engineers*, *The Pen And The Dark* and *The Width Of The World*, plus the Michael Moorcock adaptation, *The Nomad Of Time*.

1985 **■ After the success of Terry Gilliam/Level 9 adaptation, *The Saga Of Erik The Viking*, this year provides Mosaic with its biggest hit, *The Secret Diary Of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ¾*.**

1986 ■ There's only one release from Mosaic this year but it's an excellent one, and a new collaboration as RamJam creates *Twice Shy* from Dick Francis's horse-betting thriller.

1987 **■ A brace of games licensed from the BBC, including *The Archers* and *Yes, Prime Minister* are the final releases for Mosaic as Vicky moves on to pastures new.**

▶ for Christmas. "We also had a series of books on using computers for different jobs, and that was how I got to meet people in that world," continues Vicky. "Around that time Melbourne House launched *The Hobbit*, and I thought that was quite a good idea." With Sinclair Browne more focused on practical guides for the ZX Spectrum, Vicky began to explore the possibility of setting up her own business in order to publish potential book-based games. "Having had the idea, I sat down and did all the costs, talked to various people and wrote out a business plan, including a laboriously handwritten cash flow – there was no Excel back in those days!" Another of Vicky's contacts, John Wilson of John Wiley Publishing, took her cash flow and used a BBC computer to refine her calculations using a spreadsheet. "The original idea was that [Wiley's] were going to invest in my company," explains Vicky, "but that was proving to be too complex." Instead, John Wiley proposed to guarantee to pay for the first print run of Vicky's venture, and also organise the sales and distribution going forth. "That made my cash requirements lower, and on that basis I think I decided I needed something like £22,500 to get it off the ground."

With the additional backing of another publisher, Allison & Busby, and a handful of individual investors,



» [ZX Spectrum] *My Secret File* was a fairly interesting concept that ultimately didn't quite work on computer screens.

> **"I think I decided I needed something like £22,500 to get it off the ground"**
> Vicky Carne

Vicky travelled to America for the Bookseller Association Conference, where Tim Hartnell himself agreed to provide the remaining required amount. "So actually Tim was the biggest investor," reveals Vicky, "and when I returned from the States, I handed in my notice and set up Mosaic." Having had a respectable career in book publishing, it was a brave step for the 27-year-old Londoner, but an exciting one nonetheless. And having worked for a publisher that specialised in science fiction novels (Dobson Books), Vicky's first target was a game based around Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series. "I was in discussion with his publishers, and indeed I still have a letter I received from Asimov himself, signed by him, saying he'd be very happy for a game of his books to happen, if I could get an agreement with his publishers." Unfortunately that was where that particular project foundered, but Vicky was already busy talking to more agents and publishers in order to obtain licences.

Mosaic's approach was to prove an innovative one. Apart from the rarity of licensed games in the early Eighties, Vicky also determined that sometimes bundling the subject book along with the game would create a profitable niche. It wasn't a totally new concept – after all, some special editions of the aforementioned *The Hobbit* had already achieved this – but it was Vicky who came up with the term 'bookware', something that promised much more than both mere software or books could offer. The first few titles were chosen using a combination of

DEFINING GAMES



THE SAGA OF ERIK THE VIKING

■ This was Mosaic's breakthrough hit. Its previous games had all been good sellers (especially via the Book Club Associates), yet Terry Gilliam's excellent novel for kids was the most well known of Vicky's acquisitions up to this point. Sporting a different plot to the novel, it's a stiff challenge and included (albeit simplistic) graphics. It was also the first in a profitable association between Mosaic and Level 9.



THE SECRET DIARY OF ADRIAN MOLE AGED 13 1/3

■ Having solidified its reputation with *The Saga Of Erik The Viking*, Mosaic's procurement of the *Adrian Mole* licence proved an inspired choice. In the hands of Level 9's Pete Stone, the game was opened out to a wider audience thanks to its multiple choice format. Again, Level 9's writing skills was more than up to the task. Level 9 also created a sequel, *The Growing Pains Of Adrian Mole*.



TWICE SHY

■ Dick Francis's horse racing thriller may not have been a 'natural' computer game conversion, yet RamJam's Simon Dunstan produced a slick and entertaining adventure, with his usual intricate style of precise graphics. For the people who were hungering for more equestrian fun, the flipside of the cassette contained a polished horse racing betting simulation and was a welcome bonus addition to the main game.



» [C64] Vicky sold the *Adrian Mole* rights to Virgin Games which produced this sequel, *Growing Pains Of Adrian Mole*.



» [ZX Spectrum] Just trying to get the damn car started in *Twice Shy*.

factors, mainly the suitability of the story for translation to screen, the availability of the licence and whether she could get a programmer interested in that particular piece of work. After the misfire of Asimov's *Foundation*, Vicky remained focused on sci-fi, and approached another agent named Leslie Flood. Flood put Vicky in touch with two authors, Colin Kapp and Ian Watson, of *The Pen And The Dark* and *The Width Of The World* respectively. "I think we may have also done *My Secret File* in that first batch as well," recalls Vicky, the mists of time proving a mite thicker than usual. Written by John Astrop, the latter book was a big hit with children, although the computerised version didn't translate particularly well. Nevertheless, this trio of bookware, plus the C64's *Nomad Of Time*, kickstarted Mosaic, and the nature of its releases meant there was interest from a certain key quarter.

"There was this book club, partly owned by WH Smith," remembers Vicky, "and they had just started a computer game section." Older readers of **Retro Gamer** will remember this well; The Home Computer Club (see box out) distributed leaflets, chock-full with amazing offers of software in its introductory offer. However, once signed up, the bargains weren't quite so fantastic. "They also had a special selection each month, which if you didn't reply in time, you got sent." smiles Vicky. *The Pen And The Dark* (which was programmed by former **Retro Gamer** writer Keith Campbell, who sadly died in 2006), boasting a nice large cardboard box and higher price than many releases, was a natural selection for the pick of the month. Having already sold decent quantities, *The Pen And The Dark* remained a mainstay throughout the mid-Eighties as a legion of gamers failed to make it down to the post office in time.

With Tim Hartnell proving invaluable as an 'introducer', Vicky attended exhibitions and contacted magazines to harvest more potential products, and programmers to code them. One of her contacts led Mosaic to its most famous of collaborators. "A friend of mine did a lot of PR for us, a chap named Joe Lang," explains Vicky. "His company was also doing communications and public relations for the Lynx computer which came and went pretty quickly." One of the few software developers to support the ill-fated machine was Mike and Pete Austin, otherwise known as Level 9. "So Joe introduced me, and I went down to somewhere just outside London to meet them. Mike was only 17, he was still at ▶

COMPUTER CLUB

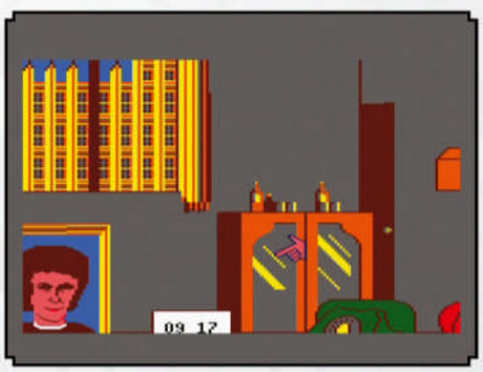
■ The Home Computer Club, an offshoot of the well-known Book Club from Book Club Associates, utilised virtually the same method as its famous forebear. Via leaflets placed inside gaming magazines, the club would offer a handful of introductory games at unbelievably low prices; single games were often just 49p, with compilations and premium titles at less than £2.50. There was a catch, of course. Signing up meant committing to purchasing at least one / slightly/ discounted full-price game every eight weeks, for a minimum of one year. Worse, failure to get down to the post office in time meant the club automatically sent you its 'Selection Of The Month" which was guaranteed to be one of the most expensive games on offer at the time. Still, it didn't do many software houses, such as Mosaic, any harm.





THE ARCHERS

■ Possibly Mosaic's oddest licensed game. Despite Pete Austin being a big fan of the BBC-produced rural radio show, *The Archers* had the potential to be a dreadfully dull game, only to be enlivened by Level 9's superior creative writing and game development skills. In this adaptation you take on the role of a junior scriptwriter and decide yourself how the plot of the series transpires... sometimes with hilarious consequences.



YES, PRIME MINISTER

■ Given the diminishing status of adventure games in general, Mosaic tried a different approach with this TV comedy licence. Utilising a neat graphical icon interface, representing Jim Hacker's office, the aim of the game was to essentially run the country, aided by conversations with colleagues and information from the outside world. Not the most interactive of games, but an interesting stab, nonetheless, at emulating the TV show.

From the Archives

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

VICKY CARNE



■ Post-Mosaic, Vicky kept herself busy, running a free local magazines business and more book publishing in the form of Business Books Direct, a magazine-style catalogue through which she sold business books around the world. Then, around 2000, Vicky teamed up once more with Pete and Mike Austin to form Email Reaction, an email marketing company, before selling it off in 2006. Today, having published Clickety Dog (clicketydog.com), Vicky mainly occupies herself with another canine-related venture, dogcoachvideos.com, a website that curates the very best in dog training videos.

TIM HARTNELL



■ An Australian journalist, self-taught programmer and prolific author, Tim forged a profitable career via his own company, Interface Publications. Combining a sharp technical insight with a knack for entertaining writing, Tim sadly died of cancer in 1991 at the age of just 40, leaving behind a high-quality library of computer-related literature.

school." The first game to spring from the Level 9/ Mosaic partnership was *The Saga Of Erik The Viking*, an adaptation of the children's novel written by Monty Python's Terry Jones. "Someone had suggested it to me while I was at the Frankfurt Book Fair," says Vicky. "I was talking to a lot of book publishers at this point, and it wasn't a completely separate industry like it is these days. Pete got very involved in making sure they got the history and everything else right – and it did extremely well, and we also got a lot of educational sales with *Erik The Viking*." Despite this, it wasn't a conscious effort by Vicky to impart some form of education upon the youth of the UK. But while the plot of each game would differ from its source material, reading the accompanying novel gave the player clues as to how to solve the game, thus encouraging children to read, if nothing else.

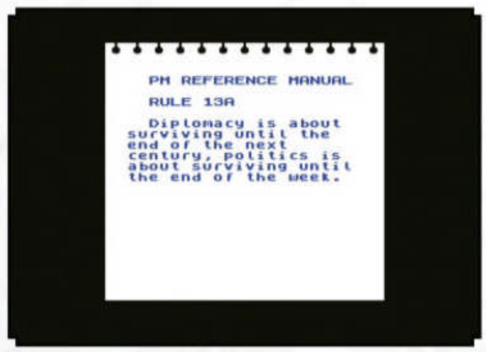
We've covered Mosaic's early games, yet **Retro Gamer** has so far omitted to ask Vicky about her company's unusual name, and she laughs when we ask about its origins. "After days and weeks of going round in circles – as one does – I think I just decided on it because we were putting lots of pieces together, as in a mosaic. The logo was done by a graphic designer named Richard Kelly. He actually created his own font too, in which he used the M from Mosaic." As befitted the industry at the time, there was also a fair bit of winging it when it came to obtaining the licences. "These days people pay fortunes, and up front, but back then it was all royalty-

> "These days people pay fortunes, and up front, but back then it was all royalty-based"
> Vicky Carne

based," says Vicky. "The market was much smaller, and when we first did it they had to decide which bit of the license it was anyway. I mean, we were all making it up as we went along! I think because we weren't a big company, and as long as it didn't conflict with any potential television or film rights, we paid a nominal advance and then about 10 per cent. As I pointed out to them, an author has to write the copy and a programmer has to write the text for the game, so that was what they got roughly from net receipts."

With the release and success of Sue Townsend's *Adrian Mole* sequel, *The Growing Pains Of Adrian Mole*, Vicky turned her attention to the first hit book, and, in league with Level 9 once more, created a similar, yet significantly different type of adventure game experience. Perhaps with half an eye on a wider market, the game featured a multiple-choice-style gameplay, replacing the oft-criticised chore of working out how the game's parser interpreted the player's inputs. "Pete [Austin] was a great games designer," remembers Vicky fondly, "and it was his suggestion. He basically wanted to make the game more accessible, although it was a nightmare to get it done." The format used a branching narrative – each choice would affect the rest of the game in different ways, similar to the many adventure





» [ZX Spectrum] *Yes, Prime Minister* the game was full of the subtle political humour of the TV series

DNA OF MOSAIC PUBLISHING

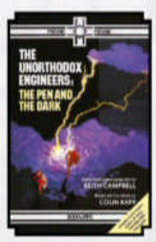
LICENCES

■ Although *The Hobbit* had laid the foundation, no other company had concentrated solely on licensed products before Mosaic. The bookish association undoubtedly gave Mosaic's games gravitas and, crucially, a niche market, helping it to survive for a considerable time during a very volatile period of the home computer games market.



BOOK CLUB ASSOCIATION

■ Mosaic's releases were a natural for the Book Club Associates' Home Computer Club due to their high price and superficially superior entertainment (they were still text adventures at the end of the day). Becoming a coveted choice of the month was even better, as this title got automatically sent out to anyone not able to get to the Post Office in time to make their order.



HIGHBROW ENTERTAINMENT

■ Everyone bought a home computer for educational purposes, right? Of course not, they were gaming machines, first and foremost, but with Mosaic's bookware, there was at least the façade of a slightly more cerebral type of game, one that didn't involve blasting aliens at any rate.





» [ZX Spectrum] *The Growing Pains Of Adrian Mole* was a solid sequel that built on the success of the first game that Mosaic published.



» [ZX Spectrum] *The Archers* neatly wove its tale of rural life with the travails of a junior scriptwriter

books popular at the time. Like Mosaic's other games, the designers also became writers, producing the new text to fit in with the existing characters, all the time ensuring carefully that the tone of the original material was maintained.

The Secret Diary Of Adrian Mole (1985) became Mosaic's biggest hit, no doubt assisted by a deal with Commodore that saw it bundled with the computer the following Christmas, coupled with Vicky's continued association with The Book Club. 1985 also brought the St. Brides adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*, before the following year saw a licence of a somewhat more modern slice of literature. The 1981 Dick Francis novel, *Twice Shy*, may not have been the author's finest work, yet its subject matter was suitably appropriate for a computer version: the hero, Jonathan Derry, discovers a digital betting system, and must return it to its owners, or meet a messy demise. As usual, Vicky trusted her developer, and left them to get on with the job. "My role was very much as publisher," explains Vicky of her day-to-day at Mosaic. "My job was to stitch the key parts – licence, programmers, graphic designers, artists – together, and organise the packaging, sales and the distribution."

After *Twice Shy* followed two of the 8-bit era's stranger licenced games. Radio show *The Archers*, with its rural themes and rustic setting, seemed as unlikely a premise for a videogame as Macsen's fellow soap adaptation, *EastEnders* (1987). Using the same template as devised by Pete Austin for *Adrian Mole*, *The Archers* positioned the player as a trainee scriptwriter for the programme, creating plotlines and adhering to the almighty Radio 4 controller's every whim. The premise was original, and one which lent itself well to Level 9's excellent sense of humour. "We got a lot of publicity with *The Archers* because it took it out to a much wider audience," Vicky says. "It was Level 9's idea: Pete listened to the show and knew far more about it than I did. It was also one of the Book Club Associates top selections; the price they paid was very low, but that was a guaranteed order of goodness knows how many copies." Mosaic's final release was another BBC licence, *Yes, Prime Minister*, and an altogether different type of game. Having forged another relationship, this time with Oxford Digital Enterprises (ODE), the latter proposed an icon-driven take on the amusing machinations of Jim Hacker and his associates. While not the most exciting of games, *Yes, Prime Minister* retained much of the humour from the series, and at least proved a little more demographically-accurate than the radio-soap-based *The Archers*.

Yet by 1987, despite the niche that Mosaic occupied, the home computer market was changing rapidly; budget games and big-name licenses ruled. Surely it must have been getting more difficult to license and create titles? "Not really," shrugs Vicky, "I decided just to stop, actually. I'd had a baby, and we'd moved out of London. I was doing different things, Mosaic wasn't a large corporation, and it was all via freelancers and subcontracts. I sold licences to Nick Alexander at Virgin Games, and I could have gone on and done some more things, but I was planning to stay at home with the baby. I didn't in the end, but that was just a personal decision."

Today, Vicky looks back at her time in the 8-bit computer game industry with a very slight tinge of regret. "It was great fun, and I look back on it extremely fondly. I mean, if I was going back now, I wouldn't stop, I'd carry on doing it. But I did a lot of other things afterwards, which were also fun, and actually published an app a couple of years ago. It's called Clickety Dog, and I think it's the only game were you get to train your dog in a realistic way!" As we give thanks to Vicky Carne for her time, we note with relief that the traffic appears to have eased outside, we reflect on an era when a one-woman company could compete with the hard-hitters. It may have been a small operation, but there's no doubt Mosaic created memorable games, setting it apart considerably from its peers. And, with deference to mum and dad, they were educational. ★

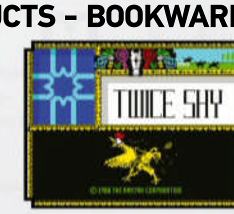
Our thanks to Vicky for her time.

QUALITY PRODUCTS - SOFTWARE



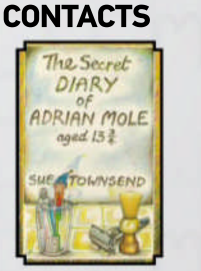
■ Thanks to its association with expert writers and programmers such as Keith Campbell, Level 9 and St. Brides, each piece of Mosaic bookware was a completely new adventure in itself, taking the spirit of its source material, yet producing something fresh and challenging suitable for the videogame format.

QUALITY PRODUCTS - BOOKWARE



■ While not many of Mosaic's releases included the original source novel or short story, the company still used oversized game boxes to boost each title's shelf appeal and show off a level of quality to consumers. The level of presentation of each game was also of a high quality, thanks to artist Richard Kelly.

CROSS-INDUSTRY CONTACTS



■ Having already been established in the book publishing business for many years, Mosaic's Vicky Carne was ideally placed to develop candidates for computer game translations thanks to her network of publishing contacts. This included publishing houses, agents and artists.



CLASSIC MOMENTS

Wings

» **PLATFORM:** AMIGA
» **DEVELOPER:** CINEMAWARE
» **RELEASED:** 1990

When you first typed his name into your Amiga, you didn't feel a whole bunch of attachment to Hank Franklin. Sure, you did your best to keep him alive during those early dogfights, but it was in the same way that you didn't want Pac-Man to get caught by ghosts. The problem is, over time you did begin to care for your goofily-named pilot. You'd read his diary, cheered in triumph as he outgunned the Fokker Scourge, and gasped in horror more than once as his engine stalled. With 12 confirmed kills, he was close to becoming the ace of the squadron.

But now, thanks to some lucky shots from an outnumbered Eindecker, he was also close to meeting his maker. As the smoke began to billow from the plane, you held your breath and dragged the mouse around in a desperate attempt to steady its descent – and finally, as the ground moved into view on an even keel, you could exhale. Hank Franklin would live to fly another day. *

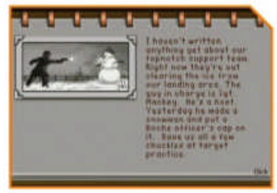
BIO

When *Wings* first arrived on the Amiga in 1990, Cinemaware was well established as a forward-thinking developer that often blended strong movie-inspired presentation with game design that varied to best represent a scene. *Wings* applied that design philosophy to World War I aviation, adopting elements of traditional military flight simulators while also using arcade-style isometric and top-down designs. The result was a classic game, but this wasn't enough to prevent the company's 1991 bankruptcy. You can't keep a good game down, though – *Wings* was later converted to Game Boy Advance, and a remastered version is now available for PC, Mac, iOS and Android.



MORE CLASSIC WINGS MOMENTS

A Personal History



It's not often that we'll highlight the story of a game, especially when it's told through text, but *Wings* deserves special mention for its diary entries. As well as giving character to your pilot and his fellow airmen, they draw you into the World War I setting effectively, mixing grim realities with humorous takes on leave and target practice.

Convoy Buster



It's said that there's no honour in an unfair fight, but honour doesn't feel important when your life is on the line. Strafing missions are all about bringing your superior firepower to bear on ground targets – breaking an infantry stalemate, disrupting the enemy supply lines by blowing up a convoy, or even taking out a moving train!

A Mission Every Night



With bombs in short supply during the earlier parts of World War I, you don't get to take part in a bombing mission until some way into *Wings*. When you finally do you'll see that it's a strong test of accuracy and observation, as you've only got a limited supply of bombs to take out the targets shown in your mission briefing.

Enemy Down!



Taking out infantry or bombing static targets is fun, but let's be honest – those things are never quite as satisfying as outmanoeuvring and outgunning an enemy pilot. He had the same chances you did, and your plane will definitely need some repairs once you've landed, but you're not the one going down in flames this time.

THIMBLEWEED PARK



A dream team of former Lucasfilm Games designers have banded together in an effort to revive the point-and-click adventure game. Josh West talks to Ron Gilbert on crafting a retro game for a modern audience

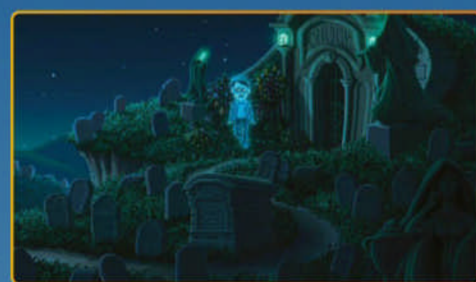
READ OUR FULL REVIEW ON PAGE 100

This is an adventure game that feels like it has been caught out time. The gaming landscape has shifted significantly in the last 30 years, ensuring that a handful of once-impactful game genres were left to gather dust as the industry pushed on in its plight to build bigger worlds, foster more realistic experiences and introduce unprecedented levels of technical fidelity to play – all at the behest of the unhinged creativity and intricate craftwork that defined many of the early classics. But that, in so many ways, is what makes *Thimbleweed Park* so appealing. It harkens back to an era in which the graphic adventure broke out of its niche and pushed the point-and-click adventure to become something of a phenomenon in the process, and at the heart of it all was Ron Gilbert and his directorial debut, *Maniac Mansion*.

The 1987 release, crafted by Ron, Gary Winnick and David Fox, would inspire a decade of wild creativity. Lucasfilm Games would lead the way, with Revolution Software and Sierra Online close behind, struggling to replicate the charm and accessibility of the former's numerous critical and commercial successes. Ron



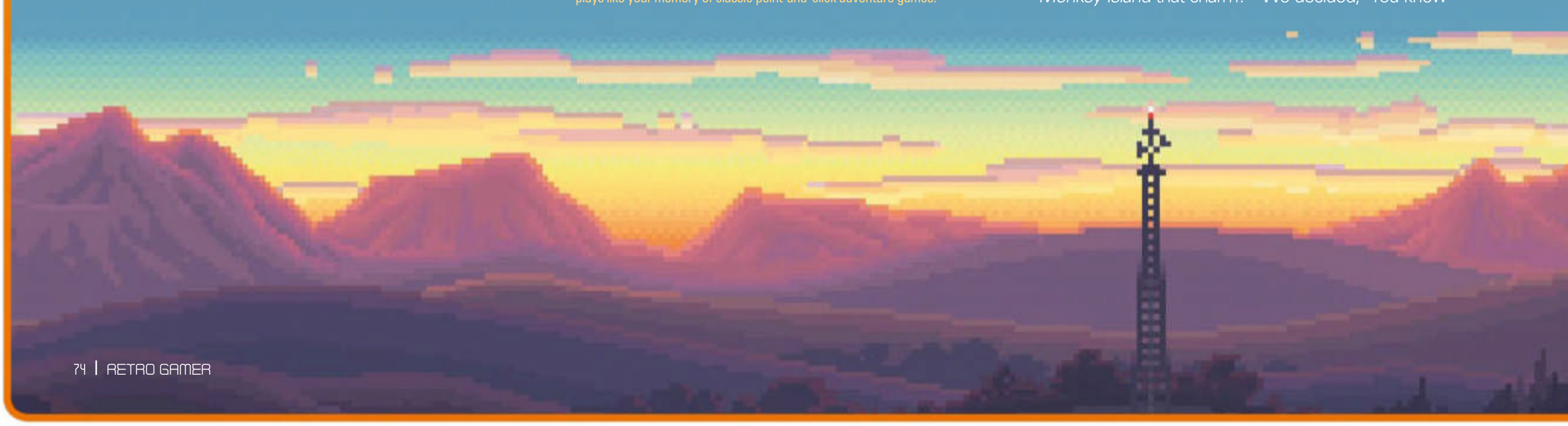
» [PC] The team has worked hard to use modern technology to build a game that plays like your memory of classic point-and-click adventure games.



» [PC] *Thimbleweed Park* will feature a casual mode should you want to go through the game without having to worry too hard about the puzzles.

himself went on to work on the likes of *The Secret Of Monkey Island* and its sequel, *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade*, and *Zak McKraken And The Alien Mindbenders* – and now, *Thimbleweed Park*. But what would it take to get the dream team of adventure game auteurs back together for first time since 1987? One lunch (a delicious lunch), 15,623 fans and $626,000.

"The original pitch for *Thimbleweed Park* was that it would be like opening a dusty old desk drawer and finding an undiscovered Lucasfilm adventure game that you've never played before," Ron Gilbert tells us, with the former Lucasfilm and Double Fine designer noting that it wasn't just nostalgia that fuelled this creative endeavour, but a desire to rediscover the lost magic behind those classics. "Gary [Winnick] and I were chatting over lunch one day about the charm that those old Lucasfilm games had and, as much as I enjoy playing modern adventure games, they are just kind of lacking in it. I don't know why that is, but they just do," he says, with something of a wry smile planted across his face. So, what is it that gave *Maniac Mansion* and *Monkey Island* that charm? "We decided, 'You know



THE DNA OF THIMBLEWEED PARK



POLICE PROTECTION

■ Mysteries abound and two FBI detectives in search of answers ensures that *Thimbleweed Park* has a distinct *X-Files* feel to its overarching narrative.

MULTITIERED PUZZLES

■ Much like in *Day Of The Tentacle*, many of *Thimbleweed Park*'s puzzles will lean on you positioning various characters in specific locations and around certain integral items.

STRONG NOSTALGIA

■ Much like Netflix hit *Stranger Things*, *Thimbleweed Park* brings a childlike sense of wonder to its strange world, riffing on an idealistic vision of rural America.

USEFUL ITEMS

■ The puzzles have been designed to be as intuitive as possible in an effort to bring in modern gamers – fans of *Kentucky Route Zero* and *Firewatch* – into the fold.

WORDS APLENTY

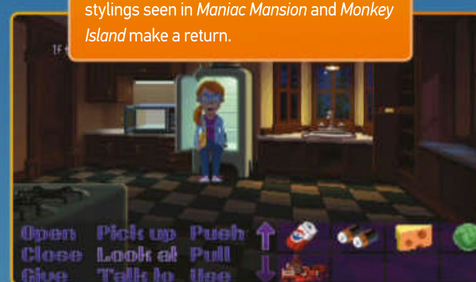
■ Ron Gilbert was never a fan of the 'Coin' or 'Icon' interfaces, and so the Verb-centric stylings seen in *Maniac Mansion* and *Monkey Island* make a return.

"It was almost, like, too easy, to slip back into it"
Ron Gilbert

what, let's just make one and see if we can figure it out in the process.'"

That process began with a Kickstarter campaign and ended with *Thimbleweed Park*, a point-and-click adventure game that is authentically Lucasfilm in all but name. Created by 12 people over two years, it's quite the contrast to *Maniac Mansion's* production (created by a team of three) and *The Secret Of Monkey Island* (a team of seven), but then the times have changed. The extra talent brought on board at Terrible Toybox – a mixture of industry veterans and impassioned new creatives – has been necessary to get *Thimbleweed Park* into release-ready shape. Because, as Ron tells us, it wasn't enough to create a game that simply recalled the past. Behind the charming 8-bit-like aesthetics, classic nine-verb *SCUMM* interface and witty dialogue trees, there needs to beat the heart of a modern release. "The vision behind this project was very much to build a game that was evocative of how you *remember* the old adventure titles," he says, noting that time has filled in many blanks, ensuring players remember graphical fidelity, puzzle design and gameplay interactions more favourably than is perhaps deserved. "Now, we have the technology and we have 30 years of game design experience that we can use to create a game that really fits your memory of those old titles."

Of course, Ron's past work sets quite the benchmark to work towards. From the start, *Maniac Mansion* was one of the biggest sources of inspiration for *Thimbleweed Park*, but as the Kickstarter defied all expectations it meant the team could expand its scope in an effort to create something larger. "We were definitely using those Lucasfilm games as a template. When we first did the Kickstarter, Gary and I were talking about making games about the same size as *Maniac Mansion*. But then, after we doubled the amount of money that we needed, we were able to hire artist Mark Ferrari and get David Fox involved. It's then that we sort of refocused a little bit," Ron continues, noting how excited he was to not only get David on board, but collaborate with Mark again, who worked as a background artist on *Loom* and *The Secret Of Monkey Island* – "Mark might truly be the most talented background artist I've ever worked with," Ron says, without skipping a beat.



» [PC] Pay close enough attention and you'll be able to pick out each writers' distinct voice in certain sections of the game.

From there, direction began to shift quickly: "It was almost, like, too easy, to slip back into it. Obviously, I've spoken to Gary and David over the years, but we haven't worked together. It took maybe two days on the project and it was just like we were back in 1987, working on something together again – it's been great."

"We were able to say, '*Okay*, now we can make a game that is a *Monkey-Island-2*-size game.' In my mind, the design of this game is (probably) very, very similar to the design of *Monkey Island 2* – in terms



MEET THE TEAM

These are just a sampling of the 50-plus weird and wonderful characters you can expect to meet in Thimbleweed Park



AGENT RAY

PIXEL COUNT 1,158

■ Agent Ray is first on the scene in *Thimbleweed Park* but her true motives are unknown. Will she get what she wants? And will she do it without murdering Junior Agent Reyes?



AGENT REYES

PIXEL COUNT 1,104

■ Junior Agent Reyes is far more of a do-gooder compared to the senior Agent Ray, but he too has a secret. As to what that secret is? You'll just have to play the game in order to find out.



RANSOME

PIXEL COUNT 1,882

■ Ransome – or as he is better known, Ransome The *Bleeping* Clown is nothing short of an awful human being, and has been cursed so he can't remove his gaudy clown getup or leave the town.



FRANKLIN

PIXEL COUNT 1,648

■ This guy is, you guessed it, a ghost. Like, he is straight up dead, however that doesn't stop him being playable in the game. Will he ever be able to speak with his daughter, Delores, again?



DELORES

PIXEL COUNT 1,145

■ An aspiring game developer, will Delores continue her dreams of working for Mmucasflem Games or will she instead stick by her family and defend its reputation in Thimbleweed Park?



CHUCK

PIXEL COUNT 1,173

■ Everybody seemed to have loved Chuck. The tycoon practically owned half of the town, after all, although his recent 'death' seems to have set the entire game's plot into motion.



» The game was pitched to Kickstarter backed as a game that could've been a lost point-and-click adventure game from the Eighties.



» [PC] Are you a fan of *Firewatch*, *Gone Home* or *Kentucky Route Zero*? Ron sees his point-and-click games as the precursor to those modern adventure games.

▶ of complexity, difficulty and all of these things," says Ron, who is eager to ensure fans understand his intentions behind *Thimbleweed Park*. "I talk to a lot of fans and they still grind through *Monkey Island* two or three times a year," he laughs, adding, "so, you know what, here's a new one! Here's one where you don't know all of the puzzles, and all the jokes."

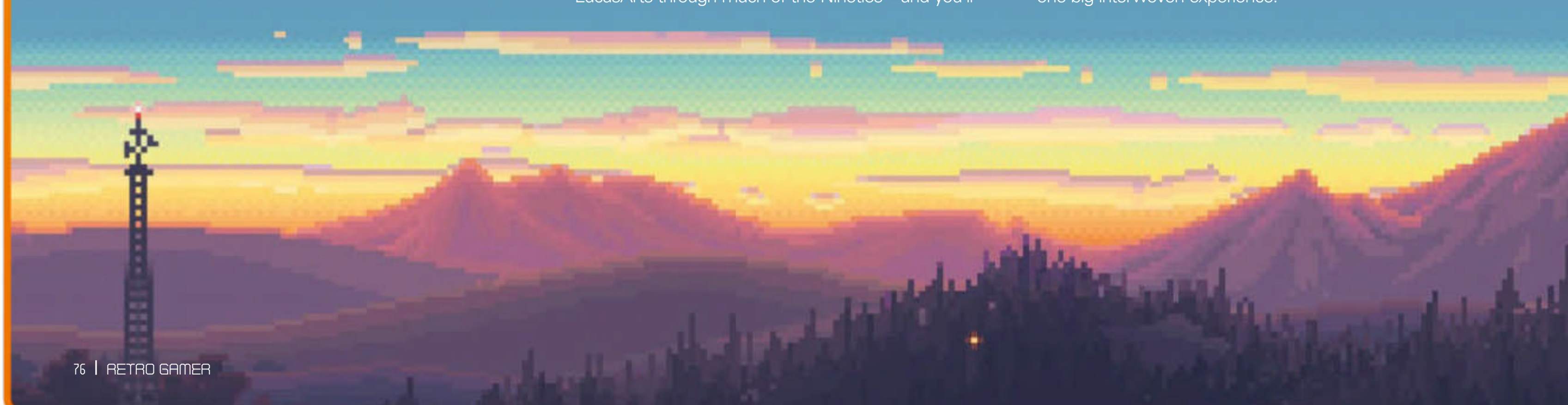
Set in 1987 (surely no coincidence) *Thimbleweed Park* follows five wildly different characters around a rundown town cast into the spotlight following a mysterious murder. Two antagonistic FBI agents, Ray and Reyes, begrudgingly take centre stage, while Ransome the clown, game designer Delores and her ghostly father Franklin make up the rest of the playable cast. On the surface, the town looks archaic, but that is done deliberately so – the ensuing game beautiful and surprisingly refreshing as a result. But as we said, this is no mere product of the Eighties; puzzle design has been refined and frustration exorcised almost entirely, while 47 fully voice-acted speaking parts only serve to breath more life to *Thimbleweed Park*'s weird world and eclectic characters. "*Thimbleweed Park* is twice as big as I expected it to be. When I started writing it, I expected for there to be around 8,000 lines of dialogue in the game and it ended up being 16,000," says Ron with a sigh, still exhausted from spending five weeks in the recording studio with his voice actors – a process he describes as "immense".

But then that word could so easily be used to describe all of *Thimbleweed Park*. Spend any amount of time surrounded by its wide-ranging cast of wonderful characters – each imbued with the sort of sarcastic and witty personality that became synonymous with LucasArts through much of the Nineties – and you'll

> **"Thimbleweed Park is twice as big as I expected it to be"**
> Ron Gilbert

quickly fall in love with its world. While you'll come for the character and strange interactions, you'll stay for the puzzles. Ron has put a lot of focus on ensuring that the puzzles, whilst still challenging, aren't as confusing as they were in the past. That's a fine line to walk that, arguably, no adventure game has ever truly balanced. "We were very careful in this game," he considers, singing the praises of the QA testers who have been rigorously testing the game for months. "Careful to ensure that every use of an item is logical. So you are never just randomly combining items.

"If done correctly, the exploration, narrative and the puzzles are all just woven together, they aren't separate entities. Narrative gives the puzzles their purpose," Ron tells us, going on to explain that it's the cohesion between these three pillars of design that are as key to making a successful point-and-click adventure game today as they were in 1987. "When we are trying to design these games we are building those three elements up at the same time. We don't write a story and then think about the puzzles and then think up a few locations after. While we are figuring the details of the story, at the same time we are adding rooms to the game and adding puzzles; if you do that right it is all just one big interwoven experience."





SHERIFF
PIXEL COUNT 1,156

■ The Sheriff has an awfully annoying habit of ending every one of his sentences with "-a-reno" but that's the least of his worries, what with a dead body in Thimbleweed Park-a-reno.



CORONER
PIXEL COUNT 1,095

■ He denies it at every opportunity, but we are all fairly certain that this is just the town's Sherif in a lab coat-a-who. That's right, he even switches his annoying catchphrase up.



GEORGE
PIXEL COUNT 1,388

■ George seems like a nice enough guy in *Thimbleweed Park*. Find your way into his post office and he will tell each playable character an array of truly awful/amazing postal jokes.



RON
PIXEL COUNT 1,245

■ Ron Gilbert is a 30-year veteran of the industry, creator of *Maniac Mansion* and *The Secret Of Monkey Island*, not to mention he's the designer of (and a denizen of) Thimbleweed Park.



DAVID
PIXEL COUNT 1,332

■ David Fox, early *SCUMM* engine pioneer and director of one of Lucasfilm/LucasArts' all time greats, *Zak McKracken And The Alien Mindbenders*; you can find him working hard in Thimbleweed Park.



GARY
PIXEL COUNT 1,223

■ Gary Winnick has had a hand in just about every one of the Lucasfilm/LucasArts classics in the last 30 years, working as everything from coproject lead, to animator, artist and writer. You can find him near Ron.



» [PC] *Thimbleweed Park* is immensely funny, sarcastic and witty – traits that are missing from many modern releases.

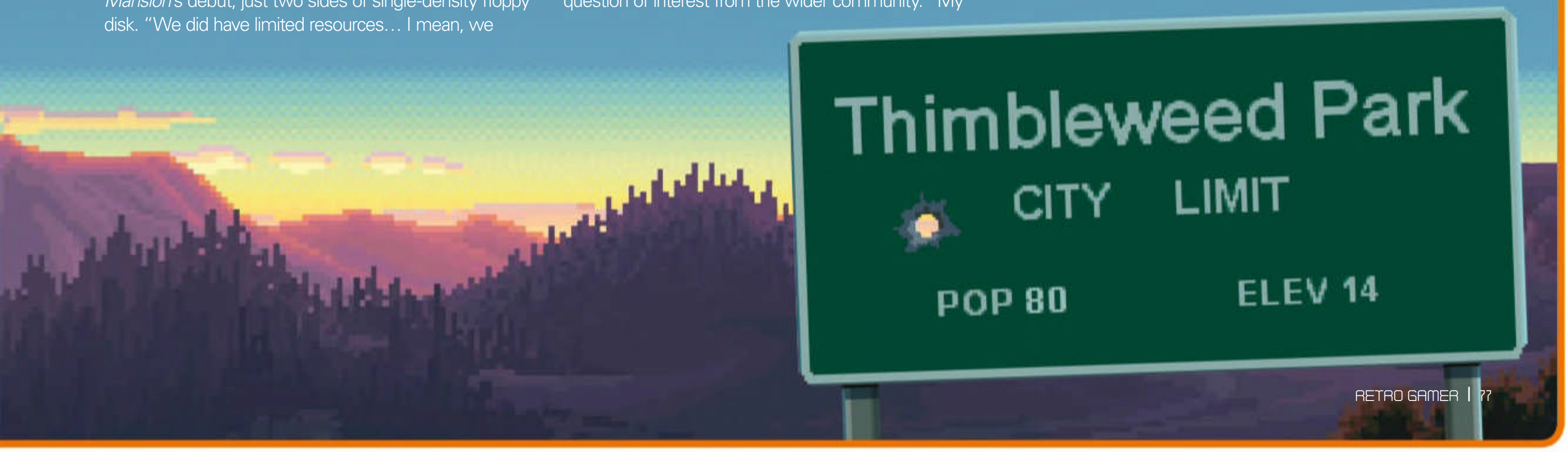


» [PC] Backers have contributed over 50 hours of content to the game, including over 2,000 voicemail messages to listen to.

Trust us, we've seen the dependency charts that track the puzzle design, "one big interwoven experience" doesn't even begin to cover it. But then we shouldn't have been surprised by that, as the size and scope of *Thimbleweed Park* is immediately impressive, far larger and layered than any of Ron's previous work. As we draw a comparison between *Thimbleweed Park* and *Maniac Mansion*, Ron is quick to confront how different the development process has been. "It has been a long time since I built the *SCUMM* engine but I've been programming non-stop since then, so jumping back into building a new engine was… well, it was mostly a hell of a lot easier," he laughs, happy with the number of development restrictions that have been lifted by modern technology.

"I have, for all intents and purposes, unlimited memory [and] an infinite number of disks to work with now," says Ron, citing numerous problems working around a memory capacity of 320k for *Maniac Mansion*'s debut, just two sides of single-density floppy disk. "We did have limited resources… I mean, we spent so much time on the *SCUMM* system dealing with the fact that we had so very little memory, and now it is just not even something that I have to worry about."

As *Thimbleweed Park* prepares for release, there is only one thing left for Ron and his team to worry about: the legacy of it all. Point-and-click adventure fans are, in many ways, tribal, with their love and appreciation of certain series and creators. And while Ron seems to have been largely successful in his attempt to build a game that plays how you remember the old classics (not how they actually were) there is still a lingering question of interest from the wider community. "My hope with this is that there are people who have never played a point-and-click adventure game before that play *Thimbleweed Park*. To me, that's the more interesting audience. The hardcore point-and-click people are going to love this game – I have absolutely no doubt that they are going to love this game – but for me the bigger challenge is to take people who have only played *Firewatch* [or] *Kentucky Route Zero*, who love narrative-driven games, and to tell them, 'Hey, you know what, this is actually a really good game and you're really going to like this as well.' To me, that's the bigger challenge in all of this." ★



Peripheral Vision

Saturn controller

» PLATFORM: SEGA SATURN **» RELEASED:** 1994 **» COST:** £19.99 (LAUNCH), £15+ (TODAY)

When designing the control pad for its brand-new Saturn console, Sega's engineers adopted the philosophy, 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' The controller was a simple evolution of the Mega Drive's six-button controller, with the addition of two shoulder buttons and a new body that fit better in the hands. Not only was the pad ideally laid out for the many arcade conversions that would make their way to the Saturn, including Capcom's six-button fighting games, it was responsive and comfortable. As a result, the pad is still widely regarded as being an excellent piece of hardware design.

However, when the Saturn made its way outside of Japan, the pad was redesigned. The new pad was bulkier and sported a more pronounced curved shape. Flatter iterations of shoulder buttons were added, as well as an odd D-pad that replaced the traditional cross design with circular pits. While some swear by the Western design of the Saturn pad, it is generally considered to be the less popular of the two versions. By the summer of 1996, Sega would replace the original Western controller with the Japanese design in order to cut costs, with a new black colour scheme to match the look of the export hardware. *



Saturn Controller Fact

■ The popularity of the Saturn controller has seen it adapted to other formats, twice by Sega Logistics Service – once as a PlayStation 2 pad and once as a USB PC pad.



ESSENTIAL GAME Street Fighter Alpha 2

If you've got a great pad for fighting games, you need a great fighting game to go with it – and *Street Fighter Alpha 2* is most definitely a great fighting game. The game offers a faster and more flexible take on the classic *Street Fighter* template thanks to new features such as Custom Combos, and features a diverse range of characters including staples like Ryu and Chun-Li, returning favourites such as Dhalsim and Zangief and newcomers Sakura and Rolento. With sumptuous 2D art and a memorable soundtrack to cap off the package, this is essential for Saturn collectors everywhere.



GEX

The gecko is an incredible animal, but add radical attitude and snappy one-liners and it gets a whole lot better. Mitch Wallace switches on the TV to recount the history of gaming's premiere reptile

In the early Nineties, it was quite apparent that mascot-driven games sold like crazy. The delivery method of choice? Platformers. The kind of vibrant, accessible adventures that anyone could pick up and play. Nintendo had struck gold with its jovial plumber and Sega found similar success with its hip hedgehog, and as such the 3DO was in search of a representative to call its very own, one that could move units of the company's infamously expensive Interactive Multiplayer. The task would fall on the shoulders of Crystal Dynamics, a small, scrappy studio that was not only looking to make a name for itself to rival the neighbouring Electronic Arts, but also broaden its burgeoning game portfolio.



» [3DO] The environments in the first *Gex* game made great use of interesting colours and creative art.

"I got recruited from Virgin Interactive by Crystal Dynamics in late 1992 to start what would be a third major project," begins Lyle Hall, *Gex* concept creator and producer. "They had *Crash 'N Burn* and *Total Eclipse* already in production, so I was basically told, 'Don't build a racing game and don't build a flying-shooting game.' The goal from the get-go was to create a mascot platformer for the 3DO, and really the job was multifold: create a character concept, develop a platform game, and build a team at the same time, all with a tentative ship date at the end of the following year."

Biding time until he could gather the required talent for the core team, Lyle spent the first few



» [3DO] This may be Toonville, but there's something innocently ominous about the Gecko Fry diner in the background.

months of development working with Crystal Dynamics designer Dan Arey on ideas, and, as Lyle says, the duo brainstormed from an unexpected direction. "We were trying to come up with attributes, but we were looking at what kind of gameplay we wanted and how we could abstract that back to a character, as opposed to coming up with a character and then turning that into a game."

Nailing down character attributes was no small task, but translating those into the perfect platforming personality was serendipitous. An artist on the budding team happened to take a vacation and ended up bringing back the essence of what would become Gex. "One of our artists went on a trip to Hawaii," recalls Lyle. "Hawaii had all those gecko shirts, and [the lizards] were wearing sunglasses. That was an image that clicked for me, and I was like, 'That's it. Let's make him a gecko, so he'll have the tongue and he'll be able to jump and stick to things.' We spent a few months just figuring out just what the f**k he would look like!"

The team tried dressing Gex up in all manner of clothing and accessories, and even went so far as to hire artists from Lucasfilm. But in the end, the design would materialise unexpectedly. "At one point," Lyle starts, "the guy who ended up being lead animator and who brought Gex to life [Steve Kongsle] went in and did a drawing in a day. He came back, and we were like, 'We've done nine million other drawings, but that's the one.'"

Given the adhesive feet, a gecko would prove rather ideal, especially in terms of control. Gex wouldn't be confined to traditional movement, he'd be able to scale walls and crawl in practically any direction. "In platformers, you were only jumping over the ground and across platforms," Lyle says. "We wanted you to be able to traverse the terrain differently. And we did talk about doing it in 3D at first, but knowing that we wanted the game to look great and considering how other teams were struggling [with 3D], we decided to go 2D. Plus, I knew I could find the right people."

And find the right people Lyle did. One of the first team members to come aboard was lead and, according to Lyle, "kick-ass" programmer, Gregg Tavares. "Once I knew I needed a programmer, I didn't think of anyone else," Lyle admits. Rounding out the core team would be lead artist Mira Ross and lead designer Justin Norr. "The game wouldn't have been the game it was without those three other people," Lyle adds.

The project now had a main character. But before it became the satire of pop culture media we know it as today, *Gex* was, at least in the schematic ▶



THE WAY OF THE LIZARD

Gex has an array of special moves to help him out in a tight spot...

TONGUE LASH



■ The trusty tongue lash. Excellent for snagging power-ups, grabbing onto ledges and grabbing the TV remote from across the room.

TAIL WHIP



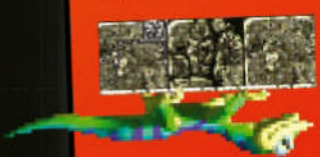
■ Gex's go-to method of attack, the tail whip is lightning fast and perfect for eliminating your average Media Dimension monster.

TAIL BOUNCE



■ Useful for crushing enemies, the tail bounce also allows Gex to jump higher and reach areas that no gecko should naturally be able to explore.

WALL STICK



■ A gecko hallmark, Gex's ability to adhere to almost any surface comes in handy when exploring some of the more precarious locations.

TAIL KICK



■ This special move is easy to execute while running and works well to quickly clear away oncoming baddies.

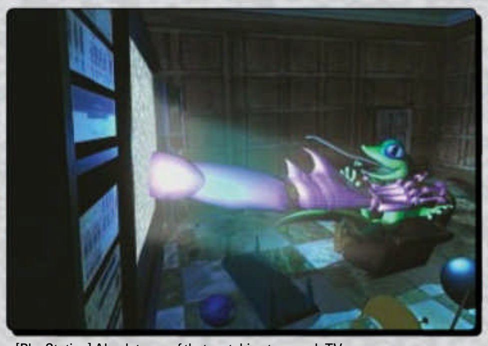
SWIMMING



■ Who knew lizards could be such good swimmers? Gex can paddle alongside the best of them, using his tail as a rudder and diving deep.

stages, something referred to internally as '*Gecko X*'. "One of the earliest concepts that we were running with, at least for a little while, was that Gex was a stuntman and he was in different movie sets, which was a decent way to showcase unique environments," says Lyle. The premise didn't last long, mostly due to the fact that it didn't provide a solid framework to support a decent story. "It didn't have enough 'meat'," Lyle explains. "We wanted something that set up the option for a villain, as well as a motivation throughout the game."

Enter cybernetic supervillain and steel-toothed overlord Rez, an evil entity presiding over the newly conceived Media Dimension. Gex, depressed and addicted to TV after his father dies, swallows a transmitter disguised as a fly and gets pulled



» [PlayStation] Absolute proof that watching too much TV may result in getting attacked by otherworldly grasping claws.

inside his screen, relegated to battling through and escaping various TV show and film parodies. Story aside, the 3DO itself was technically superior to its 16-bit competition, but the crafting process for *Gex* was still old school. Many of the techniques were still rooted firmly in the previous generation's processes. "Graph paper was the biggest thing in the world for 2D pixel games, because it was an absolute one-to-one analogy between a block of graph paper and a pixel or a tile," Lyle elaborates. "We'd draw stuff out, line the walls and create setups for learning Gex's moves. We tried to be very incremental, very *Mario*, or even very Japanese about it. And we didn't do tutorials back then. You taught the player how to play the game by having them play the game."

The levels themselves would all be hand-drawn, mostly in Photoshop, and the Gex character would be built in Maya by Steve Kongsle. This would give the lizard a somewhat familiar – and distinctly Rare – aesthetic. As Gregg recalls, the style was ahead of its time. "There was [a Crystal Dynamics artist] named Suzanne Dougherty," he says. "She wanted to prerender 3D graphics for our 2D game. Effectively, she wanted to make *Donkey Kong Country*, which wasn't out at the time. We didn't go in that direction, but she was proven right…"

The game would evolve to sport some rather impressive side-scrolling visuals, but as any fan will admit, it was the barrage of one-liners that helped make *Gex* memorable. From the beginning, Lyle wanted a character that broke the fourth wall and talked to the player, something akin to what



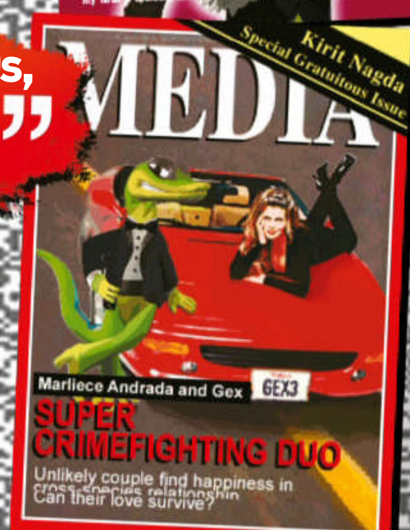
» [PlayStation] The graphics in *Enter The Gecko* were truly impressive for their time. Bright, lush and vibrantly animated.



» [PlayStation] This frozen lake looks like a great place to ice skate, but someone had vandalized that poor jolly snowman with the phrase 'Santa Bites'.

> **"Not very many people had 3DOs, but lots of people had PlayStations"**
> Lyle Hall







Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck would do in *Looney Tunes* cartoons. "I thought it was a real missed opportunity in games like *Sonic* and *Mario*," he explains. "Self-referencing dialogue that an aware character could have with the player."

To find the voice of Gex, marketing director Scott Steinberg researched comedians. What Scott and Lyle really wanted was a talented up-and-comer that could lend some real personality to their versatile reptile. "We got really lucky," Lyle admits. "We saw Dana Gould on a HBO special, reached out, had him come meet with us and it clicked. He had the energy, the sarcasm, all the different impersonations, and he got the slice of pop culture that we were speaking to and making fun of. Dana is obviously a writer, but he's also a performer, so we knew he was someone who could do the bulk of the writing [with fellow *Simpsons* writer Rob Cohen] but also do the voices."

Gex took around a year and a half to develop, significantly longer than the initial nine-month projection. Even then, content was cut, like Mode 2 stages with scaled sprites that were, according to Gregg, "like *After Burner*, *Space Harrier*, *Galaxy Force*, or the tube levels in *Sonic 2*." Soon after a BMG-published release and through a deal with Panasonic, the game would become a pack-in title for the 3DO. It would also grace the Sega Saturn and PCs, but it wasn't until *Gex* hit Sony's PlayStation that things really started to take off. "I think what really made a big difference [sales wise] was when the game shipped on PlayStation," Lyle says. "Not very many people had 3DOs, but lots of people had PlayStations."



» [PlayStation] Gex goes full-on ancient Egypt with this King Tut costume. Steve Martin would be proud.

Seeing as the main engine was finished, the *Gex* follow-up was proposed as yet another 2D game, but with all new levels and possibly new mechanics. Luckily, the team decided to veer in a new direction: 3D. The sequel would be directed by Glen Schofield and draw inspiration from a certain Nintendo 64 masterpiece… "With *Gex: Enter the Gecko* we were competing with a couple of other games that were trying to jump into the forefront of 3D design," begins level designer, David Robinson. "*Mario 64* had just come out and that blew everyone away, and we were trying to repeat that on the PlayStation. So Danny Chan, who's the most amazing programmer, created the first fully controllable 3D camera on [Sony's console]."

POP CULTURE OF GEX

The lizard was a TV junkie, and it showed in his many, many homages…



RAIDEN

GEX

■ This is an obvious reference to the antagonists in *Big Trouble In Little China*, this electric enemy could also easily pass for Raiden from *Mortal Kombat*.



GEXZILLA

GEX

■ Your typical, run-of-the-mill gecko isn't exactly terrifying, but grow it to gigantic, kaiju-like proportions and it may be time to start running.



BUGS BUNNY

GEX 2: ENTER THE GECKO

■ For a bona-fide *Loony Tunes* effect, Gex dons a pink Bugs Bunny-like rabbit suit. Hey, wait a second… is that Elmer Fudd snooping in the background?



INDIANA JONES

GEX 2: ENTER THE GECKO

■ Not even Spielberg was safe from Crystal Dynamics' pop culture parody. Gex does make for a rather dashing Indiana Jones, brown hat, leather jacket and all.



FRANKENSTEIN

GEX

■ What's more imposing than Frankenstein himself? FrankenGecko, backed up by killer tomatos and a possessed little girl straight out of *The Exorcist*.



Simply put, this was unmapped territory. It was everyone's first big 3D game, so everything in *Enter The Gecko* was being done on the fly, with the 20-man team feeling things out as they went. "We had to develop levels with three different cameras, changing from scripted to free roaming to semi-scripted," David says. "And this was back in the day without any game packaging or [other development conveniences]. It was a huge challenge for the team, because Gex had a tongue that was basically a grappling hook, and he could change direction at any time, so we went through a lot of iterations of how different setups worked."

He pauses to laugh, then adds: "And because we were a small team and Sony didn't have many [official] development kits [to go around], we just went out and bought PlayStations so we could hack them with GameSharks! We only had a year to ship the game bug-free, all while developing new tools on new hardware while never having seen a 3D camera up until that point."

> **"We slept there day and night, and luckily Crystal Dynamics fed us two meals a day"**
> David Robinson



» [PlayStation] *Gex 3* even went so far as to throw Gex into the wrestling ring against giant brute Rock Hard.

Dana Gould returned to voice Gex in the sequel, but Leslie Phillips stepped in for the PAL version, presumably to better localise the experience. *Enter The Gecko* would follow many of the original's environment themes, dropping Gex into various forms of television anarchy that included worlds like Scream TV, Kung-Fu Theater and the Pre-History Channel. Coming up with the stages was a team effort, and at least from a location perspective, a 'religious' experience. "Early Crystal Dynamics was in an old church that had been turned into a dev studio," David recalls. "We'd all gather in the 'cathedral' area, and we'd have these meetings where Glen [director] would stand in front of the team and freehand draw some level design concepts on a whiteboard as everyone shouted out ideas. Then we'd riff on all the different types of gameplay we could pull out of those concepts."

From a programming standpoint, getting the large, open 3D levels off the disc in a timely fashion was proving challenging, so the team got inventive and quite literally created a solution. "The very first time that level streaming had ever been accomplished in a game was in *Enter The Gecko*," says David. "That technology was given to the *Soul Reaver* team, which pulled off an amazing Cadillac version, which was basically streaming level sections together and then changing them."

Development was a true scramble – it consisted of building levels almost to completion, discovering something was wrong, tearing everything down and starting over again. Stages were being designed, laid out and tested up through the last



GILLIGAN'S ISLAND
GEX 2: ENTER THE GECKO

■ On Gilligan's Island, there's the Skipper, a millionaire and his wife, a movie star, the professor, and Mary Ann. Also a reptilian wise-cracker, apparently.



WIZARD OF OZ
GEX 3: DEEP COVER GECKO

■ During this *Wizard Of Oz* boss fight, Gex was originally going to be dressed as Dorothy, but that idea got scrapped in favor of a Tin Man costume.



SHERLOCK HOLMES
GEX 3: DEEP COVER GECKO

■ Sherlock Holmes is a decent detective and all, but when it comes to tongue adhesion and sheer scale coverage, Gex has the upper hand.



GUNDAM
GEX 3: DEEP COVER GECKO

■ It's never wise to pass up an opportunity to don an anime mech suit. A *Gundam*-like moment like this deserves to be cherished. Gex certainly approves.



STAR WARS
GEX 2: ENTER THE GECKO

■ It'd be naive to think that Gex wouldn't throw on an obvious stormtrooper suit and parody one of the most influential sci-fi franchises of all time.



» [PlayStation] It's tank time in the second *Gex* sequel.



» [PlayStation] No Nineties game would be complete without a totally tubular snowboarding segment. *Gex 3* was no exception.

week of production, with some levels still at beta and trying to 'close' right up until the game shipped. Roughly 28 levels were originally in development, but the finished number was slashed to just 14 – if a level wasn't progressing on schedule, it was cut without hesitation. The experience was, as David remembers, trying. "It was like being in the Rolling Stones on their first two tours," he says. "People overdosing on drugs, people having to go to the hospital just to beg someone to remember a [computer] archives password. We survived so much from just a human perspective." He pauses a moment before continuing. "Most of us were broke college kids, so there was no reason to leave the studio," he says. "We slept there day and night, and luckily Crystal fed us two meals a day."

The hours were long, the work gruelling, and it was easy to forget that people outside the studio – actual real life gamers – were looking forward to playing the finished product. "One day, just when everyone wanted to quit, our producer played us a recording of this little eight-year-old boy from Alabama," recalls David. "His town was rural and didn't have a game store, so he had to have his grandmother drive him like 50 miles to buy games. He was waiting on *Gex 2* to be released, which was late by a few weeks and wasn't on shelves when he was [at the store]. He was on the phone crying and begging that we please finish making the game so that it would be there when his grandmother drove him back. Hearing that changed everything. Suddenly all the fighting and being angry at each other over working so hard just disappeared over making sure this kid wasn't disappointed!"

Enter The Gecko hit PlayStation, N64, PC and Game Boy Color by a whole smattering of companies, including Midway, Ubisoft, Interplay, GT Interactive and again with BMG. The team got a month off to wash off and as soon as it returned, work on the next title began. Moving forward, Eidos would publish *Gex 3: Deep Cover Gecko* on PlayStation, as the company had recently acquired Crystal Dynamics, while Crave would handle publishing on the N64. Returning for a third time as the voice of Gex would be Dana Gould, but again the PAL ▶



ROLE CALL

Featuring a cast that has been kicked out of the Nineties



GEX

■ Anthropomorphic gecko and hopeless TV addict, Gex enjoys spouting snarky one-liners, downing copious numbers of flies and giving Rez one hell of a hard time.



REZ

■ Evil denizen and overlord of the Media Dimension, Rez is what happens when you cross a piranha with a sinister robot. He wants to trap Gex and make him a network mascot.



AGENT XTRA

■ A secret agent that gets kidnapped by the villainous Rez, Agent Xtra is also Gex's unrequited love interest, at least for the time being...



ALFRED TURTLE

■ Gex's dapper turtle butler, Alfred serves as the brains of the operation and always seems to appear at odd times. He spills advice when smacked.



REX

■ Rex is Gex's long-lost prehistoric dinosaur ancestor. Rez freezes this tiny tyrannosaurus inside a block of ice, but Gex manages to thaw him out.



CUZ

■ Gex's chunky leopard gecko New Jersey cousin, Cuz requires rescuing from the mob before he can help out with the game's secret levels. He loves wearing Hawaiian shirts.

version saw a new voice, this time in actor Danny John-Jules. The designers and animators, on the other hand, remained largely the same, though several key team members did leave for Naughty Dog around this time, including Evan Wells, Dan Arey and Danny Chan. Despite moving on, they'd continue to help out remotely with development.

Gex: Enter The Gecko was wrapping up just as lead designer Chris Tremmel joined Crystal Dynamics (he'd later help port the game to N64). While he was excited for the possibilities ahead, Chris knew that creating a follow-up to such a pioneering piece of software wouldn't be easy. "*Enter The Gecko* was incredibly impressive," he says. "They were doing a lot of neat technology on the PlayStation that others guys weren't doing yet. Evan Wells [lead designer] and Danny Chan [programmer] were always at the cutting edge of that stuff. So coming into *Gex 3*, we had a great base set of technology, but we also had a really big challenge ahead of trying to one-up *Gex 2*."

Part of that one-up process would be getting Gex out of the Media Dimension and grounding him more in the real world, something the first game had touched upon. The team wanted to imbue the snarky gecko with more of a superhero personality, or as Chris alludes to, a rather Batman-esque persona. "Gex had already developed all of these abilities, and because of *Gex 2*, it had become normal to put him in costumes," explains Chris. "We wanted to leverage that, so we gave him a home in the Gex Cave. I think that was probably one of the biggest elements we focused on—that giant hub world, making it playable and having it open up as you progressed through."

Adding to the *Batman* flavour was Gex's new talking turtle butler Alfred, as well as the—according to Dave, last minute—addition of kidnapped vixen Agent Xtra, played by Marliece Andrada from *Baywatch*. The inclusion did seem strange in what was still a piece of software aimed at kids. Chris



» [PlayStation] Dressing up like a giant fly with bouncy antennae may not grant superhero powers, but it sure does look damn cool.

does say that, when it came to *Deep Cover Gecko*, there were two distinct groups: the developers and the marketers. Unsurprisingly, the teams didn't always see eye to eye. "It was getting to that point in the PlayStation marketplace," Chris begins, "where there was probably some thought of like, 'Hey, if we do something like this, it makes the title a little bit less of a kids' game, plus we get to work with a *Baywatch* star'. Once they decided they were going to use [Andrada], that's when she got written into the story. There was an ad where she was topless and Gex was standing behind her with his hands over her boobs, and I remember we got a letter from a mother at that point, saying she would never let her kids play another *Gex* game."

Misplaced cameos aside, the bulk of the game was still shaping up to be a fun PG experience. While *Enter The Gecko* was notably inspired by *Super Mario 64*, *Gex 3* would take more gameplay notes from Rare's *Banjo-Kazooie*. New playable characters were introduced, like Gex's leopard gecko cousin Cuz, whose name was originally going to be Joisey, and Rex, Gex's ancient dinosaur ancestor.

"By the time we got to *Deep Cover Gecko*, we felt that [the team] had done so much with *Gex 2*," Chris recalls. "We were trying to look for other things that would fit well with the levels and game mechanics, so there were a lot of little aspects like





» [N64] *Enter The Gecko* was ported to the Nintendo 64 as *Gex 64*. It even received a new level based on the Titanic.



» [N64] The N64 port of *Gex 3* retained the original's excellent graphics, though much of the full-motion video had to be excluded.

> **"Gex's origins, in my opinion, come from unique solid gameplay"**
> Chris Tremmel

vehicles and creatures you could ride. Looking back though, they probably weren't the best design choices. We could have leveraged the character a lot more. *Gex* turned into this kind of shtick of like, 'superhero secret agent that changes costumes and cracks a lot of jokes'. *Gex*'s origins, in my opinion, come from unique solid gameplay and great game mechanics. *Gex* and *Gex 2* had that, and so did *Gex 3*, but we were starting to go off a little bit into territory that maybe wasn't best suited for *Gex*."

Adding so much content wasn't being done for variety's sake, but because the team was attempting to expand the *Gex* world. All of these bits and pieces were going to fuel yet another game, one that shifted genres but was cancelled. "We knew that after we were done with *Gex 3*," Chris starts, "we were going to do a kart racing title called *Gex Team Racing*. Eidos wanted to call it *Eidos AllStars* and put in Raziel [from *Soul Reaver*], Nikki from *Pandemonium!* and Ninja from *Ninja*. Also Lara Croft, but Core said no."

Gex 3: Deep Cover Gecko released on PlayStation first, followed by a port to N64 and also a 2D reimagining on the GBC. There would be no Windows release this time around. And with that, at least for the most part, was where the *Gex* train came to an halt. Yet beyond the MIA kart racer, there surely were plans for a fourth entry, right? "We were going to go back to it," Chris reveals. "We had a lot of concepts for *Gex 4*, like levels and locations designed out, and we knew where we were going to go with it. But we wanted to take a little bit of a break from [3D platforming]. We



» [PlayStation] Mule rental on the Organ Trail level is about as glamorous as it sounds.

developed *Walt Disney World Tour: Magical Racing Quest*, and then once the Xbox [came around], we ended up building another racing game and Xbox launch title called *Mad Dash Racing*, which contained Gex as a playable character. Noah Hughes [designer] was pushing for a *Gex 4*, but it never got off the ground; I think everyone was burned out on *Gex* at the time. Then the GEICO gecko came along and ruined everything!"

Today, Gex remains dormant, though the his legacy seems to live on, if only as a nostalgic bastion. "It was a special time in the industry," Chris closes. "It sounds corny, but it was a lot simpler, a lot happier, a lot more fun. And for most of us, that probably won't ever happen again." ✱

Thanks to our interviewees for telling their stories.

CONVERSION CAPERS

More Gex than you can shake a lizard's tail at

3DO



■ The first iteration of *Gex* to be released stands out among the ports as being the only version that gives players the ability to directly save progress, in this case to the 3DO's internal memory. Graphically, it's the weakest port, as it only runs at 30 frames per second.

PLAYSTATION



■ Sony's console received a solid port of *Gex*, but gone missing in the transition from 3DO was, strangely, the save feature. This was replaced by a more rudimentary password system, though to make up for it, the game runs at twice the frame-rate of the 3DO port.

SATURN



■ Released after the PlayStation port, this version is more or less identical to the release on Sony's console. It relies on passwords instead of save data, oddly bypassing both the Saturn's internal memory and memory cartridges. It also performs better than the 3DO original.

WINDOWS



■ The last and final flavor of *Gex* to see a release, the PC version is rather similar to the Saturn and PlayStation ports. Like those, it ludicrously lacks a proper save feature, practically sacrilege when considering hard drive space. At least it's compatible with the Microsoft SideWinder.

Future Classic

Modern games you'll still be playing in years to come

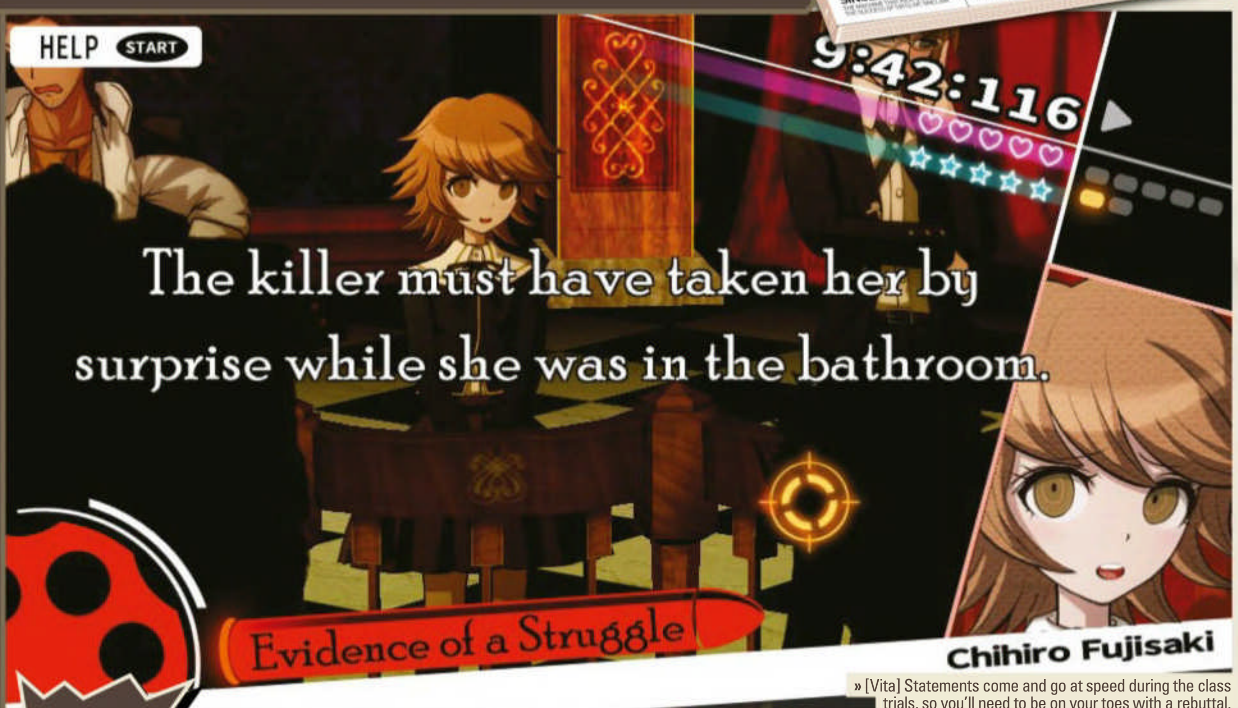


Info

- » **Featured System:** PlayStation Vita
- » **Year:** 2014
- » **Publisher:** NIS America
- » **Developer:** Spike Chunsoft
- » **Key People:** Yuichiro Saito (producer), Kazutaka Kodaka (writer), Masafumi Takada (composer)

Go Deeper

- » In the Japanese version, Monokuma was voiced by Nobuyo Oyama – a voice actress best known for portraying the popular children's TV character Doraemon.
- » In development, the game used black-and-white visuals with red blood; when colour was added, blood was coloured pink instead to retain visual impact.



» [Vita] Statements come and go at speed during the class trials, so you'll need to be on your toes with a rebuttal.

60.

DANGANRONPA: TRIGGER HAPPY HAVOC

Once unmarketable in the West, visual novels have finally found their audience and this cult hit is one of the primary reasons why. Nick Thorpe explains why it will be remembered for years to come…

THE BACKGROUND

At the tail end of the Noughties, Spike was having a crisis of creativity. Having spent a couple of years releasing sequels and updates, the Japanese developer decided to introduce an original game for the first time in a while. The PSP was chosen as the target platform, as it was cheap to develop for and had an audience considered receptive to new ideas.

A concept called *Distrust* sprang from Kazutaka Kodaka, who proposed a mystery set in a high school, featuring trials and executions. The initial prototypes of this visual novel adopted a straight horror theme that was considered too gruesome – the antagonist was a man missing half of his skin and the environments were splattered with blood. Worried that sales would suffer as a result of this overly dark tone, Spike reworked the Distrust concept into *Danganronpa*, a visual novel which shared many common gameplay themes with Capcom's famed *Ace Attorney* series. Despite Spike having had designs on an English language release, the game wasn't finished until 2010, which scuppered the chances of a viable localisation due to the decline of the PSP market in the West. However, the game picked up popularity outside of Japan thanks to the dedicated fans discovering the game on forums and subsequent unofficial translation efforts, leading to an official localisation of the PlayStation Vita version in 2014.

THE GAME

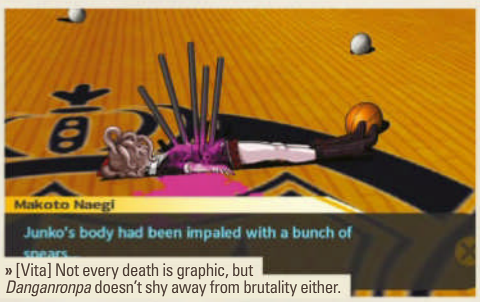
Danganronpa is a visual novel game with strong puzzle elements. Much like the *Ace Attorney* games, *Danganronpa* presents you with a series of murders to solve. These cases are divided into investigation sections, in which you search crime scenes for evidence, and trial sections where you use that evidence to reveal the identity of the killer.

However, in *Danganronpa* you play the part of Makoto Naegi – an ordinary boy chosen by lottery to attend Hope's Peak Academy, a high school that only accepts students of prodigious talent. You arrive on the first day only to find yourself locked into the



» [Vita] If the students seem reluctant to kill one another, Monokuma is often on hand to provide a new motive.

> **"The game is genuinely funny, which is rare in any era"**



» [Vita] Not every death is graphic, but *Danganronpa* doesn't shy away from brutality either.

school by the 'headmaster' Monokuma, a two-tone stuffed bear who stipulates a series of rules. The first is that you must live in the school until you graduate. The second is that if you wish to graduate, you must murder one of your fellow students. The last is that your success in graduating will be determined by class trial. If your classmates fail to identify you, you go free and they will all be executed. If they succeed, you alone will be executed.

Initial attempts at cooperation to find a way out of the school are inevitably doomed to failure, thanks to Monokuma's 'helpful' provision of motives, and soon the killings begin. Your classmates include students with conventional talents, such as the novelist Toko Fukawa and the programmer Chihiro Fujisaki, as well as those with offbeat skills such as the fortune teller Yasuhiro Hagakure and the fan fiction writer Hifumi Yamada. Some of these will factor into cases, but each character also has hidden depths that will be revealed through the course of the game.

Investigation scenes are simple point-and-click affairs, and the real meat of the game comes in trial scenes. During the Non-Stop Debate sections students will talk over one another, and you shoot down contradictions with Truth Bullets (evidence, in actuality). Other sections include the Hangman's Gambit, in which you try to piece together a key word relating to the case, Bullet Time Battle, a rhythm action game in which you ride out the desperate assertions of a key witness, and a concluding section in which you piece together comic book panels to establish the true events of the case. Though characters are represented with static 2D art, clever camera direction and a strong soundtrack ensures that proceedings feel suitably dramatic. Character executions are presented as FMV sequences, and they're certainly memorable – mostly for their humour.

As the number of students dwindles and despair sets in, your ultimate goal is to find out the true identity of the mastermind behind Monokuma, as well as the reason that you've been trapped inside the school. The key question is how many Hope's Peak students will survive to learn the truth…

WHY IT'S A FUTURE CLASSIC

Although the visual novel genre first broke through in the West on the Nintendo DS, the Vita is the first system to offer a robust selection of English language releases, and *Danganronpa* will be remembered as one of the most engaging examples of the form. The puzzles are well constructed, if sometimes too obvious (a point addressed in the sequel), and the presentation is much more exciting than in similar games thanks to strong visual style – the distinctive characters, strong camera and striking executions all serve to make the game a joy to look at. What's more, the game is genuinely funny, which is rare in any era. The cast is easy to become attached to thanks to strong writing, a fact which makes the character deaths that much more gut wrenching when they do come, and you'll constantly be kept guessing as to which way the plot will turn next. The lack of alternative endings means you'll probably only play it once, but you'll definitely never forget it. *

Things of note

MULTIMEDIA MURDER



Danganronpa's popularity has seen it adapted twice as a manga, once as a TV series and once as a stage play that has been toured in Japan.

GIVE UP HOPE



In a scrapped 'true ending' scene, the students of Hope's Peak agree to abandon their talents and all escape, before the events of the game are written off as a dream.

PORTS & CLUBS



The success of *Danganronpa* on Vita has resulted in ports for other platforms, including the PC and PS4 – the latter as part of the twin pack *Danganronpa 1.2 Reload.*

EXTRA HOMEWORK



The Vita release of *Danganronpa* adds bonus features, including the School Mode which allows you to get to know characters better.

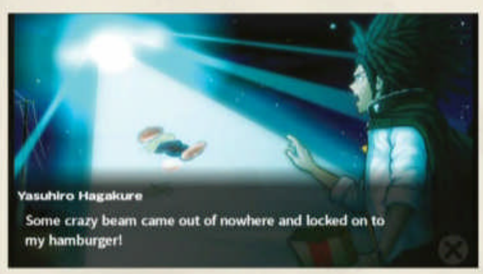
SEQUEL SPOILERS



As a heavily plot-driven game, it's advised that you play the series in order – the sequels and spinoffs all contain major spoilers for earlier games, not least the identities of victims.



» [Vita] Characters often show signs of despair at their situation; getting closer to them socially may help.



» [Vita] Some of the scenes in *Danganronpa* are very funny, albeit utterly baffling.

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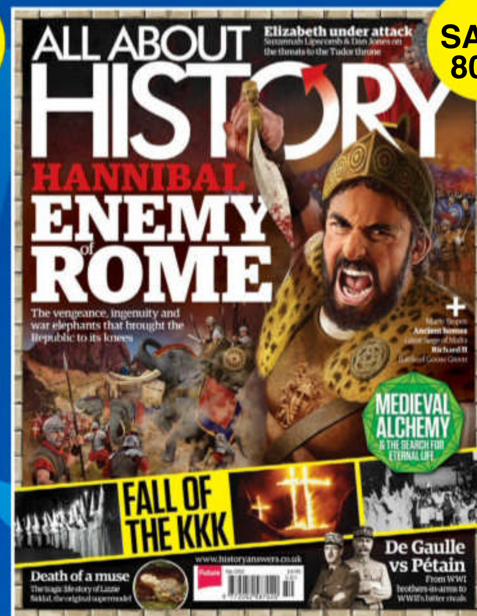
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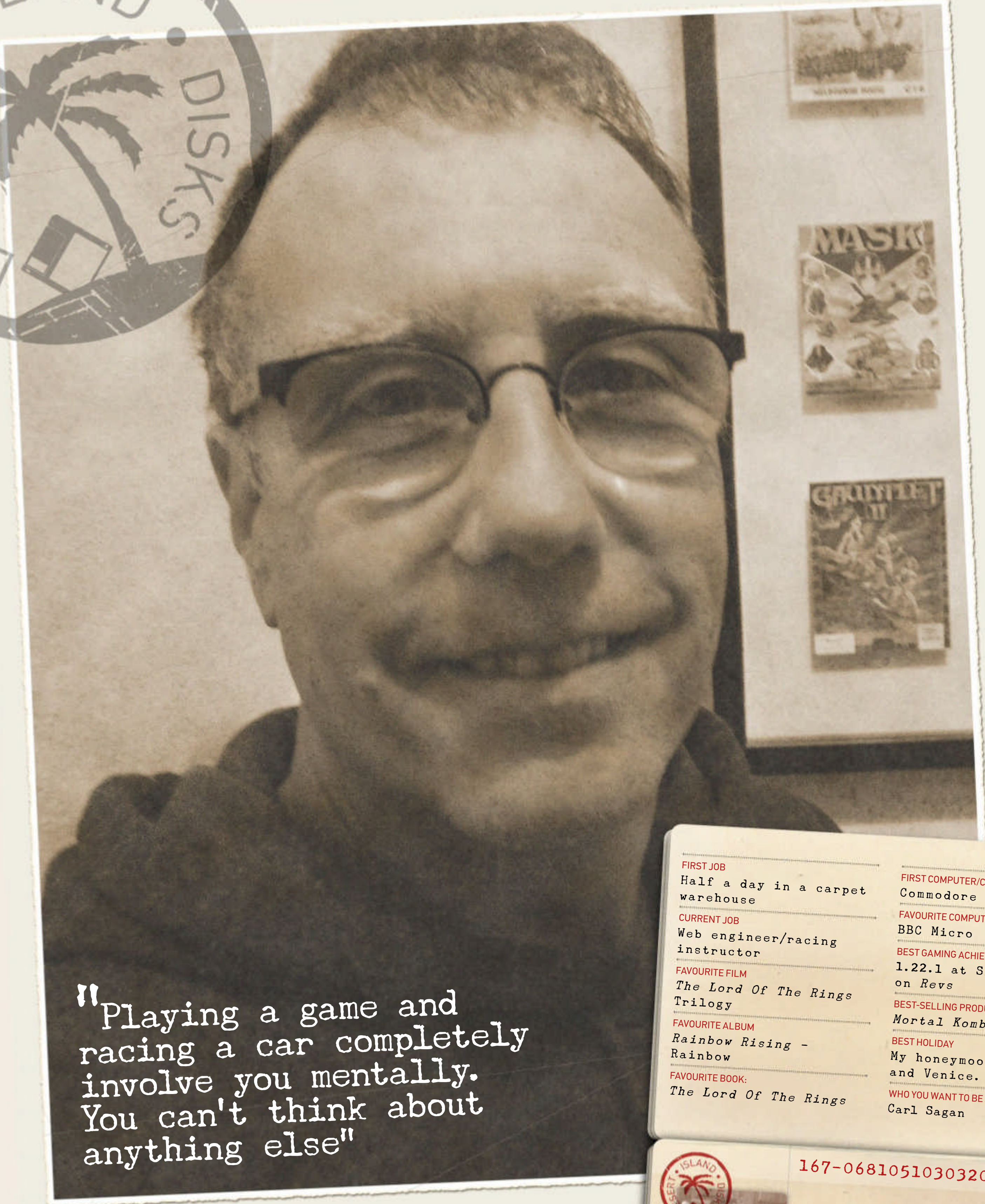
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"Playing a game and racing a car completely involve you mentally. You can't think about anything else"

FIRST JOB
Half a day in a carpet warehouse

CURRENT JOB
Web engineer/racing instructor

FAVOURITE FILM
The Lord Of The Rings Trilogy

FAVOURITE ALBUM
Rainbow Rising – Rainbow

FAVOURITE BOOK:
The Lord Of The Rings

FIRST COMPUTER/CONSOLE
Commodore VIC-20

FAVOURITE COMPUTER/CONSOLE
BBC Micro

BEST GAMING ACHIEVEMENT
1.22.1 at Silverstone on *Revs*

BEST-SELLING PRODUCT:
Mortal Kombat II

BEST HOLIDAY
My honeymoon to Rome and Venice.

WHO YOU WANT TO BE STRANDED WITH
Carl Sagan



167-068105103032068117103

SEX
M

NAME
Richard Costello

DATE OF BIRTH
02/02/65

PLACE OF BIRTH
Nottingham, England

BIOGRAPHY
Starting out coding educational software for the BBC Micro, Richard handled the 16-bit ports of many big-name franchises such as *Mortal Kombat* and *Golden Axe*.

DESERT • ISLAND • DISKS

Richard Costello

What cherished games would you take to the island?

From coding games to driving supercars, Richard Costello has had an eventful career. Paul Drury asks him about Fatalities, Lemmy and putting the brakes on Jenson Button

As we sit in Richard Costello's tastefully-converted farmhouse in rural Leicestershire, listening to tales of working on big-name franchises such as *Gauntlet* and *Mortal Kombat* and his days driving single-seaters around Donington Park and Silverstone, we wonder aloud if there are parallels between coding games and racing fast cars, beyond both being boyhood fantasies for many of us?

"Playing a game and racing a car completely involves you mentally," nods Richard. "You can't think about anything else. I've always liked engineering, too. When I was making games, it was more about how to make the hardware work, playing around with chips… that's why I got out of it when the PlayStation arrived and coding became more like English not talking to electronics, which is what I loved."

It was a love that began at Mr Knock a maths teacher's afterschool computer club, messing about on a TRS80 at the start of the Eighties, which led to Richard taking A Level Computer Science at West Bridgford College of Further Education in Nottingham. Ever the romantic, he produced a playable version of his girlfriend's favourite arcade game, *Check Man*, during the course as her Christmas present, though his first published work was *Colours* and *Shapes* for the BBC Micro, a simple shape-matching title for young children. Following this educational path, he landed a job at Loughborough University, working on the MIME project (Microcomputers In Maths Education), but soon found a way to get paid for playing games.

"They took me on for 18 months, assuming it would take me a month to convert each of these 18 packages they needed for the BBC Micro. Instead, I spent around six weeks writing an emulator so they would all work, delivered them one a month as promised and spent the rest of the time playing *Revs*."

Suffice to say, Richard's lap times on Geoff Crammond's superlative F3 simulator take some beating. It also allowed him time to convert Melbourne House's *Way Of The Exploding Fist* to the Commodore 16, with a little help from his mum. "I wrote the code on my BBC Micro but there was no way to connect it to a C16, so I'd leave the hex code in the morning before I went to work and my mum would type it in during the day. She never made a mistake," he grins, proudly.

The project pocketed him £2,000 and provided useful experience in squeezing a big title onto more limited hardware, though Richard now admits memory constraints left no room for a proper game ending, so he simply made the final boss unbeatable. We hope this finally provides some closure for exasperated C16 gamers.

Meanwhile at his proper job at Loughborough, Richard found himself in a Portakabin full of tech-loving oddballs assembled by Professor Bajpai, the impressively-named head of department. "There was Paul Carruthers, who had and still has a streak for doing very odd games, Ian Downed, who bounced off that creativity and Paul Williams, who'd been unemployed since attacking his boss in the Seventies, who the Professor claimed to have 'found on a train'. Then there was me, with long hair, a Dennis the Menace rugby top, skin-tight jeans and boxing boots like Bruce Dickinson, the frontman from *Iron Maiden*. We were all a bit weird."

From this odd camaraderie came cult puzzler *XOR*, primarily created by Paul Carruthers and Ian Downend, with Richard contributing to *XOR*'s 'Designer', which allowed players to create their own levels. After its release, Richard left to join Gremlin Graphics, which was expanding from its Sheffield home and setting up a new base in Birmingham.

"It was very much the centre of the gaming universe," says Richard. "In the same building was US Gold and also the Centersoft warehouse, with us in an office at the end. We could see the racks of games and joysticks through our windows! Geoff Brown [head of US Gold and co-owner of Gremlin] would often walk through, like he was surveying ▶

Trivia

Richard's 90-year-old Mum still lives in the same Nottinghamshire house where Richard coded all his games in the Eighties and Nineties. Even the wallpaper remains unchanged.

Golden Axe in all its beast-riding, underwear-sporting glory.



Praise for Richard

Here's what **Retro Gamer** has to say about Richard Costello's work...

Darran Jones
I didn't own an Amiga until quite late, so a lot of Richard's work on the computer went unnoticed by me, as I was playing the likes of *Mortal Kombat II* on my Mega Drive. I did however play a surprising amount of *Gauntlet II* on Commodore's machine, which gave me a great amount of pleasure.

Paul Drury
During his decade-long tenure in the games business, Richard brought his technical nous to many fine 16-bit ports of high-profile coin-ops and finding out how he approached the challenges was intriguing. And anyone who's made a game about Lemmy is alright in my book.

Richard produced the Amiga version of Mortal Kombat before moving on to the all-conquering sequel.



his empire, with his Ferrari Testarossa parked outside."

Richard was set to work on the new Atari ST and began his first project, *Ramrod*, in 1987. Intended as a cross between *Knight Lore* and *Marble Madness*, he collaborated with graphic artist Kev Bulmer, who had recently completed work on many of the 8-bit conversions of *Gauntlet*. Sadly, it remained uncompleted when Richard left the company two years later. "*Ramrod* just kept growing and there were lots of distractions, too. There was a row of arcade machines near us, which people were converting [to home machines] and people like Fergus McGovern from Probe would wander round, with contracts. That's how I ended up doing the ST and Amiga ports of *Gauntlet II* in my spare time. Then I remember Geoff coming in one day with a tape he'd been sent from Hungary. He asked us to have a look and it turned out to be *Tetris*. I remember him saying, 'I'll make some money out of this…'"

Richard also found time whilst not finishing *Ramrod* to help out with C64 toy licence *MASK*, which did hit the shelves in 1988, a solid, if unremarkable, racer-turned-blaster. As the Eighties drew to a close, it didn't take much convincing for Richard to leave Gremlin and join his friend and colleague Kev Bulmer as a freelancing team. They secured a contract from Activision to convert Sega's coin-op *Hot Rod* to the 16-bit computers, a top-down racer with an emphasis on pimping your ride. "I was really into *Revs* and an arcade game called *Winning Run*," says Richard. "They were serious driving simulators but *Hot Rod* was more like a cartoon, with cars with big engines and massive wheels. Yes, we got the arcade machine but we were working from our homes so the machine was at Kev's because he was doing the graphics, which meant copying them pixel by pixel off the screen!"

> "What I love is talking to electronics. I think in Assembler"
> Richard Costello

Using a Mega4 ST, bought with the proceeds from the *Gauntlet II* job, Richard would play the cab in Kev's garage and then return home to mum's house and program his take on the action without any handy source code for reference. *Hot Rod* was a decent enough effort to help land the contract from Probe for porting *Golden Axe* to the Amiga and ST, something of a coup for the boys. "I think we got pretty close to the original with that," smiles Richard. "There was some good code in there! I used some work from *Gauntlet II* and in turn used some of the *Golden Axe* code in our next game, *Terminator 2*. That's what made me realise it wasn't so much the quality of the game you produce, it's the title. *Terminator 2* was absolutely rubbish, complete dross, yet it sold loads of copies. It kind of made you think, 'What's the point, then?'"

It prompted something of an existential crisis for Richard, and coupled with the fact he thought *Terminator 2* was a shoddy movie licence cash-in with flimsy gameplay, he simply didn't put his heart and soul into the project. "I'd go out at lunch for a quick ride on my motorbike because I was so stressed [with the game] and end up doing 200 miles. I'd come back knackered and go to bed."

Unsurprisingly, he was late delivering the final code, resulting in financial penalties, which prompted a spilt from his long-time collaborator Kev. As a parting gift, Kev offered Richard the contract from Virgin for *Motörhead*, a game based on the hard-drinking, hard-rocking singer, Lemmy. Given a fairly free hand to interpret the unlikely licence in any way he chose, Richard used the *Golden Axe* engine as a starting point, conveniently changing the main weapon into a different sort of 'axe'. Lemmy could batter various musical rivals with his electric guitar as well as repelling them with his noxious breath. "That came from an old school friend called Paul Hickman, a long-haired drummer, who used to eat whole jars of muscles and then breath on people," smirks Richard. "I got to design the whole game for once. Each stage was a different kind of music he was competing with, like rap and country and western, and Jason, who was doing the graphics, was a goth, so that became a

Timeline

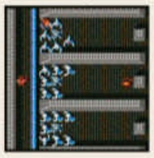
1985

WAY OF THE EXPLODING FIST
■ **YEAR:** 1985
■ **FORMAT:** C16
Richard's only title for the Commodore 16 was this plucky version of Melbourne House's martial-arts-based beat-'em-up.



1988

GAUNTLET II
■ **YEAR:** 1988
■ **FORMAT:** ST/Amiga
The first of many fine 16-bit conversions, you can read more about Richard's work on this sequel in RG164.



1989

HOT ROD
■ **YEAR:** 1989
■ **FORMAT:** ST/Amiga
This top-down racer allows much pimping of your ride and works especially well when trying to force rivals off the road.



1990

GOLDEN AXE
■ **YEAR:** 1990
■ **FORMAT:** ST/Amiga
Another solid port of an iconic coin-op. Who doesn't enjoy kicking elves dressed as a scantily-clad barbarian warrior?



Richard's final release was the Amiga port of the T-Rex-taunting Primal Rage.





» [BBC Micro] The fiendish puzzler *XOR* – see RG 74 for a full Making Of feature.

Fergus McGovern

"He was a really nice guy and good fun," recalls Richard of his former boss Fergus McGovern, who sadly passed away last year. "I met him first at US Gold and he could come across as a little bit boring. I think he was a surveyor who saw there was money to be made in games. I remember I once went to a karting event with him in 1990 with a bunch of programmers and we both got to the final. He was leading and I was second, which I was happy with, but then I thought, 'Gilles Villeneuve wouldn't think like that!' I really put my foot down and got into the zone, like when I play *Tempest*. I overtook Fergus and won and that's when I first thought, 'I need to get into motor racing!'"

level. And obviously it would end with Lemmy rescuing his band mates and playing a concert!"

The gig earned Richard a cool £20K but his next project was right on the money. Initially helping old Loughborough University colleague Paul Carruthers on the Mega Drive version of *Mortal Kombat*, coding the 'Chop Chop' minigame, intro sequence and various technical routines, Richard took on the Amiga port himself. It was a tough challenge but was helped by the Amiga sharing the coin-op's 68000 architecture and he also handled the all-conquering sequel. "That was much better as the first *Mortal Kombat* was a coding mess," he admits. "For *Mortal Kombat II* it was like I got to finish it off properly. I was really pleased with it. One of the main reasons [the series] did so well is that the publisher told everyone it was fantastic! Don't get me wrong, it's a good game, but the hype behind it was incredible."

Despite his involvement with such a huge franchise, Richard only made around £25K for his work, mainly because the 16-bit computers he was coding for were clearly on the decline. "You could see from the sales," he sighs. "Consoles and PCs were taking over."

His final project was the Amiga version of prehistoric beat-'em-up *Primal Rage* and we wonder if, after over a decade in the industry, he felt a little like a dinosaur himself? "I wasn't that old," he laughs. "I wasn't big enough to be a dinosaur, anyway. People like Jeff Minter and Geoff Crammond were the big names. I was the coin-op conversion guy. An engineer. *Primal Rage* was the obvious next thing to do and was supposed to be the next big thing but you could [see] the Amiga was dying. It sold 9,000 copies, which was good for an Amiga 1200 title apparently, but that was only a tenth of what my Amiga version of *Mortal Kombat II* had sold a year earlier and it was ▶

Costello on Costello

Richard picks his three favourite projects



■ MORTAL KOMBAT II
I look at projects as technical challenges and the sprite routine for this was really cool. People have no idea what a convoluted process it is!



■ GAUNTLET 2
It has 128 background tiles and 128 foreground sprites and they are all being drawn in three 50ths of a second or less…



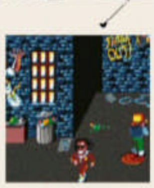
■ HOT ROD
It was fabulous working with Kev Bulmer. He has since passed away from cancer and is much missed.

1991 — 1992 — 1994 — 1995

TERMINATOR 2
■ **YEAR:** 1991
■ **FORMAT:** ST/Amiga
Richard's least favourite project of his whole game programming career. To paraphrase Arnie, he won't be back.



MOTÖRHEAD
■ **YEAR:** 1992
■ **FORMAT:** ST/Amiga
This bizarre scrolling beat-'em-up features gruff frontman Lemmy dishing out heavy punishment to musical rivals.



MORTAL KOMBAT II
■ **YEAR:** 1994
■ **FORMAT:** Amiga
He handled the Amiga port of the original too, but this version of the massively-successful sequel is one of Richard's proudest releases.



PRIMAL RAGE
■ **YEAR:** 1995
■ **FORMAT:** Amiga
Richard's final game was a decent enough version of Atari's beast battler, somewhat hampered by the control system.



DESERT ISLAND DISKS

Readers' Questions

Merman: Apart from *Ramrod*, do you have any other unreleased games?
***Napalm Nigel*! It was a character that looked like Tintin but could burst into flames like The Human Torch. It was towards the end of the Eighties on the ST and Amiga. It was a platformer with a cartoon look and I've still got some graphics and the code for the main loop. but nothing more than that.**

Northway: Did you consider compression for the *Gauntlet II* speech samples?
No, and they were massive. The only thing we had access to was the coin-op machine, so we recorded them onto tape from that and then digitised them. Half of the memory is taken up by the sound in that game!

Mr Jenzie: How did you get the gig for the *Mortal Kombat* Mega Drive conversion?
I was only helping out Paul Carruthers, who was a friend and lived in Nottingham. I got a flat rate from Probe… actually, Nick Pelling [*Frak!*] wrote the sprite decompression code for it and only got £500!

Eric: Can you tell us more about the disk swapping of Amiga *Mortal Kombat II*?
It ran in 1MB but, yes, the Fatalities had to be loaded as required from floppy. You needed at least 1.5MB for them to be available in memory all the time. I created the game on a PC, connected to an A500+ with 1.5MB of RAM and an external floppy drive. On an A1200 with 2MB it ran best … but A1200's didn't appear until *after* it was released!

Paranoid Marvin: The Amiga has one fire button and the Mega Drive has up to six. For *Mortal Kombat*, was it like making two different games?
Yes and it was more convoluted with less buttons. You had to learn all the combinations. With *Primal Rage*, you could hold the fire button and then fight with the stick. That was me being a bit revolutionary and it worked really well – if you understood it! Which lots of players didn't.

Kebabinho: How did you find working on the mighty C16?
It was hideous. It was slow, it had no memory and its graphics modes were awful.

Motörhead was an above-average fighter that's still fun to play



> "Terminator 2 was rubbish yet it sold loads of copies. It kind of made you think, 'What's the point?'"
> Richard Costello

nothing compared to the PlayStation."

Recognising that times were changing and having no desire to get into the big teams and high level programming of PlayStation development ("My maths wasn't good enough to do 3D anyway and I have a mental illness when it comes to using someone else's operating system – I think in Assembler," adds Richard), he changed direction and became a racing instructor, having been racing single-seater cars and teaching at the Jim Russell Racing School at Donington Park for several years already. He mentions almost casually that one of his pupils was none other than Formula One driver Jenson Button. Could he tell instantly he was coaching a future champion?

"To be honest, virtually everyone who became a racing driver in the Nineties did a course with us at some point," Richard quips. "No, I couldn't tell if Jenson was going to make it. Apart from his name. That's a cool name, he's got loads of money and his dad was an old mate of Bernie Ecclestone [former head of Formula One] so he was bound to become an F1 driver. The only person in over 20 years of instructing who I knew was fantastic straight away was Jan Magnussen. He won everything on his way to Formula One and raced for McLaren. He was incredibly quick from his first lap in a car but he found it all too easy… His son is in Formula One now and he is getting his head down."

Richard, much Jan's son Kevin, has kept his head down and has what some might term a 'portfolio career'. He has developed and maintained various websites, including Donington Park's, has instructed VIPs at numerous Grand Prix events and is one of the British Superbikes Safety Car drivers, yet nothing directly in the games business. "If you're into games programming now, you're effectively coding business software," he explains. "You're a very small part of a very big thing. As I've got older and wiser, I've come to understand my shortcomings. I've realised I can't work with anyone else's code. I need to do everything myself."

Given the re-emergence of the one-man development team in the smartphone age, we wondered if he hadn't at least been tempted to return to game making? He shakes his head before smiling and recalling one last yarn.

"I did once convert an F1 racing simulator, one of these huge, million-pound machines used at corporate events, for this bloke I met. It was based around PCs and basically played this version of *Formula One Challenge* from Electronic Arts. When Sony made a deal with Formula One, they said all the hardware used had to be theirs. Ferrari refused to make the switch, which meant his setup would be scrapped. I said, 'Why don't you change all the cars to Ferraris, use Ferrari's test track Mugello, and make it a Ferrari simulator, then you can keep the PCs?' He asked me if I could do it… for £500 an hour. I thought that sounded fine! It took me a couple of days, which earned me £15K…"

Appropriately enough, the cash that Richard made from that job went towards a Ferrari 355 of his own. He drives a more family-friendly Audi these days, but when he's not tinkering with Raspberry PIs, he still gets to drive Ferraris and Lambourghinis most weekends, working for racing schools – if you ever receive one of those Gift Experience presents of a day burning around Silverstone in a supercar, Richard may well be the instructor sat next to you. With videogames and motor-racing still a big part of his life, we wonder if he has ever really left boyhood behind?

"No," he smiles. "I don't think anyone who's properly into either of them ever really does." *

Trivia

Ben Daglish enjoyed producing the music and sound on several of Richard's games because he could whistle the desired sound effects and Ben could do the rest. Easy.

Many thanks to Richard Costello for his hospitality and Martyn Carroll for the introduction and additional help with this article.

Richard Costello's Desert Island Disks

The games that Richard simply couldn't live without

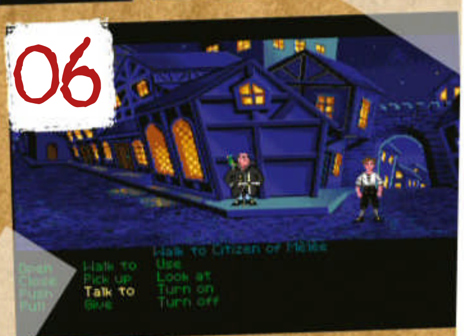
















01 Galaga (ARCADE)
It was flat out fast. Just the ultimate shoot-'em-up. I used to play it in the basement of Selectadisc on Market Street in Nottingham. My high is 110K I think…

02 10-Yard Fight (ARCADE)
I played this in the arcade near the Odeon cinema in Nottingham. I was really into American Football when it used to be fantastic on *World of Sport* when it showed the Superbowl once a year, ten years before Channel 4 started showing it!

03 Tempest (ARCADE)
Awesome. I get totally lost in it, just like when I'm driving a racing car. Nothing else in the world exists when you're playing *Tempest*.

04 Revs (BBC MICRO)
I used to play it all day long. To get my 1.22.1 lap time on Silverstone, you had to go through the chicane flat out in fifth gear. Twice. It's so satisfying when you do it.

05 Elite (BBC MICRO)
It was all-encompassing. It was the first game you really 'lived' in. And the best thing was when I hacked it so I could play it from disk and not tape!

06 The Secret Of Monkey Island (PC)
It was immersive. You felt like you were in a cartoon and the sense of humour was totally in tune with mine. Obviously there's going to be a file inside a cake!

07 Winning Run (COIN-OP)
My first car was a Mk1 Golf GTi, and once a week I would have a very quick-late night drive from Nottingham to Skegness and back to play this for hours.

08 Grand Prix Legends (PC)
It's a simulation of the 1967 World Championship, which is the last year before Formula One cars had wings added. Basically, before that, the faster you went, the lighter the car was, so driving at 200mph is like driving on ice… you're drifting all over the place!



Golden Axe: The Revenge Of Death Adder

WORTH GETTING TOLD OFF FOR

» **ARCADE** » **SEGA AM1** » **1992**

We've all heard stories of games that got people into trouble. Some recall how perfecting laps on *Super Mario Kart* caused them to miss exams, while others would spend countless late nights with *Jet Set Willy*, which led to being late for school the following day.

My own particular tale involves Sega's arcade sequel to its hit 1989 brawler, *Golden Axe*. I was a huge fan of the original game and would continually play it whenever I visited Poole Quay Amusements. By the time the sequel arrived in 1992 I was 18 years old and working at Tesco. We had an arcade machine in our cafeteria and games would be rotated every few weeks, leading me to discover some truly quirky games like *Diet Go Go* as well as getting reacquainted with the likes of *Mr Do!* and *1942*.

Sega's sequel wasn't quite as good as the original (the genre was getting a little long in the tooth by then) but it was a lot of fun and I'd constantly find myself shovelling in another coin so I could witness the next boss or discover a new outlandish-looking creature to ride on. It's essentially the same game as before with better aesthetics, a refined magic system, new vertically-scrolling sections and multiple routes, but I lapped it up regardless. In fact, it became responsible for me being late clocking in on several occasions because I was always playing it when I should have been downstairs working.

On one occasion, I was so obsessed with completing the final stage that I'd completely lost track of time and barely noticed the new player who had joined in – who just happened to be my line manager at the time… When I clocked on to who it was and sheepishly looked at him he just looked at me and said: "Get back to sodding work, I've got this." Two days later the arcade machine was replaced with a coffee machine. I was never late for work again. *


Push Button



>> It's certainly been a good month for games. We've got big reviews on Thimbleweed Park and Yooka-Laylee, touch down with Persona 5 and catch up with the few relevant Switch games we missed last issue



» [PC] Franklin has some useful abilities that sets him apart from his corporal peers.

Thimbleweed Park

POINT-AND-SLICK

INFORMATION

» **FEATURED SYSTEM:** PC
» **ALSO AVAILABLE ON:** PS4, XBOX ONE, iOS, ANDROID
» **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
» **PRICE:** TBC
» **PUBLISHER:** TERRIBLE TOYBOX
» **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE
» **PLAYERS:** 1



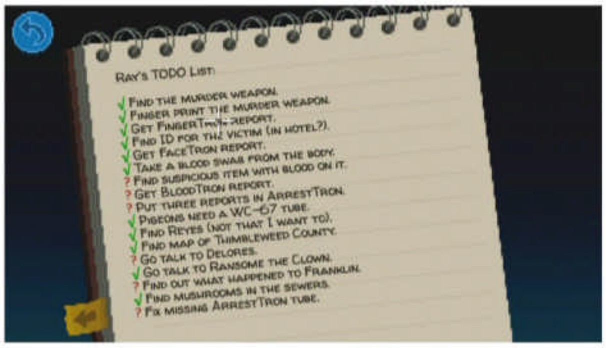
It feels quite fitting that we're reviewing *Thimbleweed Park* and *Yooka-Laylee* in this month's issue. Both titles started off life on Kickstarter, both wanted to resurrect interest in their chosen genres (the point-and-click and 3D platformer genres respectively) and both are headed by well-known names from within their respected genres. What's interesting, though, is that while each game trades on the past, *Thimbleweed Park* also looks to the present, and in doing so, it's a far more successful game.

Of course, if you were to look at *Thimbleweed Park* on face value you'd be forgiving for thinking that you were looking at some lost game from the LucasArts' catalogue (something that Ron and Gary planned from *Thimbleweed*'s conception). Its graphics are delightful retro, the interface looks exactly as you'd expect it to and it's filled with a bunch of kooky characters to interact with. In short, it feels like a game you could have played on your Amiga or PC in the late Eighties.

And yet, while it clearly pays homage to the point-and-click adventures of yesteryear, *Thimbleweed Park* very much feels like a natural evolution of those earlier games. Ron Gilbert has clearly been paying attention to how things have moved on and has done everything he can to ensure exploring *Thimbleweed Park* is as effortless as possible. Useful mouse controls make controlling your characters incredibly easy, while double clicking the left mouse button speeds up your character. Navigating the inventory for both items and using verbs feels nice and slick, while switching between characters is incredibly simple, particularly when playing on a controller. Each main character also has a handy 'TODO' list, which makes it easy to focus on what you need to do next. There's nothing revolutionary here, but it's a move away from the games it is paying such loving tribute to and feels all the better for it.

Point-and-click games rely on strong stories, clever puzzles and interesting characters to keep the player invested and in this respect *Thimbleweed*

» [PC] The 'TODO' list is an excellent addition, ensuring that you always know what you need to do next.

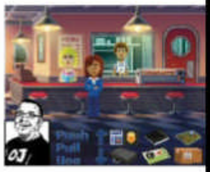




BRIEF HISTORY

» Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick are no strangers to the point-and-click genre, having worked on several key games, including *Maniac Mansion*, *The Secret Of Monkey Island* and *Day Of The Tentacle*. *Thimbleweed Park* marks a brand-new collaboration for the developers and started off life as a Kickstarter project.

PICKS OF THE MONTH



DARRAN
Thimbleweed Park
As much as I enjoyed *Yooka-Laylee*, I have been far more impressed with the shenanigans of the *Thimbleweed Park* characters.



NICK
Persona 5
I've been patiently waiting for this game for three and a half years, and it was everything I hoped it would be. Yet another stellar entry in the series.



» [PC] The art design throughout *Thimbleweed Park* is exceptional, with each location bristling with atmosphere.



» [PC] Ron and Gary are never afraid to poke fun at their early LucasFilm careers.

Park excels. The game's clever and twisting story kicks off with a murder that introduces two of the five main characters you'll eventually control: Agent Ray and junior agent Reyes. Not only are the two agents clearly based on Mulder and Scully (just two of the numerous pop culture references that *Thimbleweed Park* makes) they also have their own secret agendas outside of their murder investigation, which gradually comes to the fore as the adventure continues. The other three characters are just as memorable and are initially introduced via short, clever flashback sequences. Ransome is a foul-mouthed clown who has been cursed and can never leave *Thimbleweed Park*, Franklin Edmund is the ghostly brother of Thimbleweed's tycoon and town saviour Chuck Edmund, while Delores Edmund is Franklin's daughter, who was disowned by her rich uncle after she left the family business to become a videogame designer. All five characters are extremely well written, with good arcs that can be surprisingly moving at times.

The vile Ransome, provides most of *Thimbleweed Park*'s laughs, but every character has the sort of sass and quick-wit that marked the creations found in the pair's earlier games.

Just as memorable are the many characters that you come into contact with during your lengthy investigation. While many of them are based on stereotypes – stoners, jealous siblings, convention geeks – the sharp writing and enjoyable dialogue ensures that everyone you meet feels fully fleshed out. Particular highlights include Willie The Wino, the Pigeon Brothers and Sexy Riker, but there are plenty of others that will leave a lasting impression on you long after you have cleared them from your investigation.



Puzzles are another area that both Ron and Gary have excelled at with past games, and they're of an equally high standard in *Thimbleweed Park*. The best come from using the abilities of the main characters to solve problems, but there are several that require you to switch between characters in order to get the desired result. Some of them can be a little on the nose, but many of them will require a fair amount of massaging of the old grey matter in order to complete. Puzzles are always logical, too, so it's rare that you come across anything that will cause you to scream with rage when you discover the actual solution.

Everything is tied together with some truly gorgeous pixel art, which brings the world of *Thimbleweed Park* to life, but uses all sorts of clever lighting effects to further enhance the vibrant world that Ron and Gary have created. It's a lovely looking game that we'll never get tired of exploring.

Although it doesn't quite reach the heights of *Monkey Island* and *Maniac Mansion*, *Thimbleweed Park* is still a fantastically entertaining adventure that's easily the best game Ron and Gary have released since leaving LucasArts. It effortlessly captures the spirit of their old games, but has also been brought bang up to date as well, ensuring it appeals to as many gamers as possible. Here's hoping that this is the first of many *Thimbleweed Park* adventures. ✱

✱ WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
MANIAC MANSION (AMIGA)



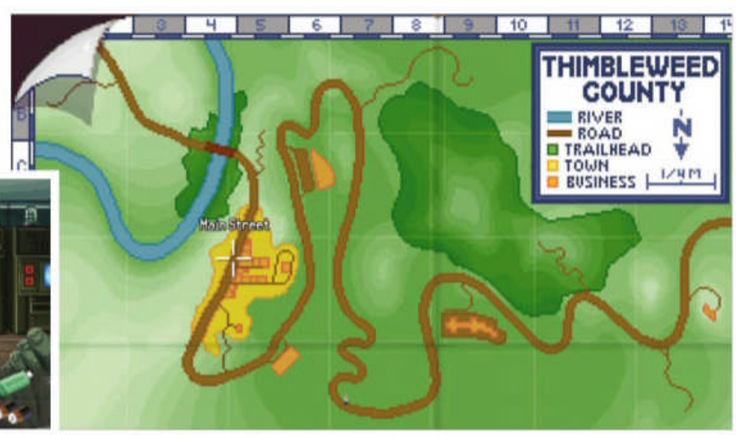
▼ SOMETHING NEW
BATMAN ARKHAM VR (PS4)



In a nutshell

A brilliant and faithful modernisation of the classic point-and-click genre that never forgets its roots and isn't content to win you over with nostalgia alone.

>> Score **90%**





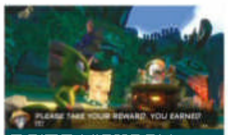
[Xbox One] The bosses of *Yooka-Laylee* are enjoyable to fight. We also like the isometric setting used here, too.

Yooka-Laylee

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

INFORMATION

- » **FEATURED SYSTEM:** XBOX ONE
- » **ALSO AVAILABLE ON:** PC, PS4, SWITCH
- » **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- » **PRICE:** £34.99
- » **PUBLISHER:** TEAM17
- » **DEVELOPER:** PLAYTONIC GAMES
- » **PLAYERS:** 1-2 (1-4 MULTIPLAYER)



BRIEF HISTORY

» *Yooka-Laylee* is Playtonic's first game, but the developer is no stranger to the platform genre, with members having created the likes of *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Banjo-Tooie* while working at Rare. *Yooka-Laylee* is a clear spiritual successor to the popular N64 games and remains the most successful UK-developed game on the crowdfunding service.

The great news about Playtonic's spiritual successor to *Banjo-Kazooie* is that it plays exactly like a classic 3D platformer plucked straight from the late Nineties. The bad news about Playtonic's spiritual successor to *Banjo-Kazooie* is that it plays exactly like a classic 3D platformer plucked straight from the late Nineties…

It seems a little churlish to mention *Yooka-Layee*'s sense of overfamiliarity because we all knew what we were getting from the very beginning. Ever since Playtonic successfully launched and smashed its £175,000 Kickstarter target it was obvious that the team's first game was channelling the spirit of *Banjo-Kazooie*, which is hardly surprising when you consider how many of them were involved with Rare's 1998 classic. What *is* surprising is that *Yooka-Laylee* rarely attempts to try anything new to progress the genre or fix well-known issues with those early 3D games.



» [Xbox One] The ability to expand worlds is a great idea that we'd love to see in more games.

When it works, *Yooka-Laylee* works brilliantly. Its hub world is expertly designed, slowly opening up to reveal clever new shortcuts as Yooka and Laylee gain their numerous new powers. Accessing new areas of Capital B's Hivory Towers is often a challenge in itself and only the subtlest of hints let on to where you need to go next. *Yooka-Laylee* begs you to carefully explore the new areas you discover, without revealing all its secrets in one go via a convenient map. This element of exploration continues with the unlocking of new worlds, which are accessed once a set number of 'Paigies' have been collected. Once a world has been unlocked the player has the option to hunt out another batch of Pagies (or use ones you have already gathered) to expand the world, effectively opening up brand-new areas and challenges that were previously unavailable.

It's a pity, then, that several of *Yooka-Laylee*'s game worlds feel generic and stale – they lack the fun and creativity that was found in the original *Banjo-Kazooie*. Things start off strongly in Tribalstack Tropics, which features a variety of interesting characters to interact with and complete



» [Xbox One] Flying really opens up your access to the game, but it also highlights numerous camera issues.



» [Xbox One] Yooka and Laylee can transform into a variety of different forms.

quests for, but it doesn't maintain the momentum as later worlds unlock. It doesn't help either that the first three levels feel like inferior versions of some of *Banjo-Kazooie*'s greatest stages. Those worlds, while small, felt alive and full of interesting possibilities, but the expanded worlds of *Yooka-Laylee* stretch the focus and it often turns into a dull collectathon as a result. Capital Casino is arguably the best area, being full of creative puzzles that constantly push the constraints of the genre, but these flashes of creativity happen rarely, which is a real shame.

One thing that is a distinct improvement over Playtonic's earlier dabbling in the genre when its members were still part of Rare is the actual crafting of Yooka and Laylee. While some of their abilities will be instantly familiar to platform fans, Playtonic has put plenty of thought into how they interact with their environments. New abilities can be unlocked in any order from the slippery Trowser, and allow the pair to turn invisible, absorb the abilities of nearby fruit bushes, walk around underwater in giant bubbles, and eventually fly (which often causes the game's camera to go into involuntary spasms). It's a testament to Playtonic's knowledge within the genre that the pair's abilities have been so well crafted around the new stages they are picked up in and how cleverly they expand exploration when revisiting earlier worlds.

We also love the large amounts of nods to Playtonic's past and the platform genre in general, many of which are handled exceptionally well. Every character in the game speaks in a mumbling voice that Rare perfected on the N64; Kartos' mine cart challenges are a clear tribute to *Donkey Kong Country*; a skeletal explorer appears to be a sly nod to Sabreman, while the ability for Yooka and Laylee to transform into a new form on each stage is straight out of *Banjo-Kazooie*. Playtonic wears its heritage for all to see and is clearly proud of its past. It doesn't always get it right, though. A couple of annoying multiple-choice question rounds instantly annoy, while the sheer number of collectibles falls the wrong side of fun. *Yooka-Laylee* has a staggering range of 1,202 objects to find that range from 'Pagies', to 'Quills' 'Play Coins' and 'Ghost Writers' and we discovered even more on further exploration. There's a fine line to collecting items in platformers and it's a line we feel Playtonic has crossed here. The larger size of the game worlds means that it becomes a real chore hunting down the last few collectibles of each area, and there simply isn't the compulsion to seek them out like in similar games.

In many ways we feel like *Yooka-Laylee*'s incredible service to its Kickstarter fans has occasionally stifled its creativity and direction. In sticking slavishly to the template created by *Banjo-Kazooie*, Playtonic has made an enjoyable platformer that feels like a throwback to a bygone era. It provides an excellent blast of nostalgia, but its reliance on overfamiliarity means that it also feels a little clichéd at times and bereft of new ideas. It's a cracking start from a hugely talented team, but we can't help but feel it could have been a whole lot more. ✱

In a nutshell

***Yooka-Laylee* is a loving tribute to 3D platforming games, but its odd flourishes of creativity are held back by its over-reliance on long-outdated genre mechanics.**

>> Score **77%**



✱ MINIGAME MAYHEM



One of the biggest additions to *Yooka-Laylee* is a number of retro-styled games that can be found either in the game world, or played in multiplayer mode. Some are based on retro classics such as *Skidmarks*, while others take their inspiration from more modern releases like *Flappy Bird*. The quality of the eight available games range in quality and while the likes of Gun-let Run, Glaciators and Blag The Flag are quite fun, offerings like Hurdle Hijinx, Jobstacle Course and Kartos Karting are completely forgettable. All the games admittedly become far better when played with friends, but they should be seen as a diversion to the main game, rather than anything with substantial lasting appeal.

✱ WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
BANJO-KAZOOIE (N64)



▼ SOMETHING NEW
RATCHET & CLANK (PS4)



RETRO ROUNDUP

WE LOOK AT THE LATEST RETRO-RELATED RELEASES



Persona 5

» System: PS4 (Tested), PS3 **» Buy it for:** £54.99
» Buy it from: Online, retail

The latest instalment in this long-running JRPG series doesn't reinvent the wheel, but presents a refined take on the series' formula – dungeon exploration and turn-based combat, held together with stylish presentation and the social link system that provides rewards for getting to know characters. Dungeons are improved over *Persona 4* as they're predesigned rather than procedurally generated, allowing for more puzzle-solving to be added, and a new security system ties in with the game's theme of being thieves, encouraging you to attack enemies stealthily. The ability to talk to enemies has returned, allowing you to hold them up for money or items, or even persuade them to join you as new personas. Fans of the genre shouldn't miss it.

» **Score 92%**



Super Bomberman R

» System: Switch **» Buy it for:** £49.99
» Buy it from: Online, retail

Tired is perhaps the best way to sum up the latest (and very expensive) *Bomberman* game. While its 50-stage story mode adds (irritating) voices and some admittedly impressive boss battles, it's a rather bland experience like the story modes of many earlier *Bomberman* games. The multiplayer is another matter entirely and that's where the game starts to earn its goodwill. There are lots of configurations during play allowing for up to eight players to participate, while a decent selection of courses and power-ups ensure the game remains fun and frantic. The in-game customisation isn't as comprehensive as we'd like and the controls aren't as tight as we'd want in a *Bomberman* game, but there is fun to be had, if you can swallow the high price tag…

» **Score 60%**



Fast RMX

» System: Switch **» Buy it for:** £18.99
» Buy it from: Online

F-Zero in everything but name only, *Fast RMX* straps you into a futuristic craft and sets you off on a blisteringly-fast Grand Prix. Shin'en's racer will feel instantly familiar to those that enjoyed their share of Captain Falcon – there's even a track that feels maybe a little *too* familar to Fire Field – so expect boosting, crashing and screams of frustration in multiplayer as Player Two steals first from you in the last millisecond. There is an effective *Ikaruga*-like colour system, where you have to shift your ships 'boost mode' from orange to blue to benefit from any corresponding boost pad – get the wrong colour and it will slow you right down and may cost you the race. In all, *Fast RMX* is a great racer for a relatively good price for such a feature-packed title.

» **Score 81%**



» [Amiga] "You have been recruited by the Star League to defend the frontier."

Gaming NEWS

JAMMING WITH AMIGA

Run by game developers Underground Arcade, the AmiGameJam 2016 ended on the last day of January 2017 and, as the name probably suggests, was a competition for Amiga developers. Entries were to be based on television shows or movies – preferably ones that hadn't previously received an Amiga game – but, since the Christmas period went past during the competition, festive games were also allowed for those who didn't find that primary theme appealing.

There were two platform-based games entered which both leant on the festive side of things. *Easter Egg* is a vertically-scrolling affair where a young chick heads out in search of eggs while avoiding enemies, while *Max Knight Xmas Edition* is a Christmas-skinned version of the first stage from Pixel Nation's *Max Knight*. This latter title was something of a preview for the full game which was released at the end of February, with the competition release sporting snow covered platforms to add a little festive flavour to the cute looking medieval quest.

Would-be martial artists can try *Brus Lii* which, despite the name, isn't based on the excellent 8-bit platformer and instead dishes out some scrolling martial arts action and bobble-headed character sprites – some artistic licence has also been applied to add zombies to the roster of enemies, but we're not complaining because giving them a kicking is surprisingly cathartic! *Santa Run* is the only entry to require an Amiga OS4 machine and sees the red-suited, jolly man dashing around in search of presents.

The competition saw its fare share of shoot-'em-up entires, too. We've mentioned Project R3D's *Bridge Strike* previously because it's a neat-looking reworking of the Atari 2600 classic *River Raid* that has been in development for a while and this latest update for the jam is worth a blast. *The Last Starfighter* is a relatively simple horizontal zapper for AGA Amigas – OCS versions have been written and should hopefully appear shortly – which is based loosely on events from the movie of the same name, using digitsed images of the film to illustrate the intro sequence.

Some of the games are classed as incomplete or previews by their developers and readers will need to check that their Amiga meets the required specifications, but all of the competition entries are available to download from the jam's official website which can be found behind Kikstart.eu/amigamejam-2016.



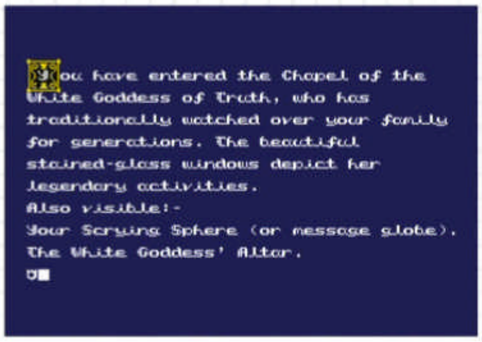
» [Amiga] Brus Lii apparently battles against zombies.



» [Amiga] Having a cracking time with *Easter Egg*.

NEW GAMES NEEDED

If you have a homebrew project you would like to see featured then please contact us at: **darran.jones@futurenet.com**



» [Amstrad CPC] Supplies collected and time to head out in search of Ellwood.

LIKE A GLOVE

The Council of Wizards have selected a champion to destroy the evil Malmor and his domain the Tower Of Despair using a pair of magical gauntlets - one is in your care already but the other is held by the harmit Ellwood so, before demon-smiting can take place, the quest is to reunite the two precious artefacts.

This text-based adventure was originally published by role playing specialists Games Workshop for the C64 and Spectrum, but this Amstrad CPC version is a brand-new port based on the Spectrum version. Head on over to Kikstart.eu/despair-cpc for more.

> **"We found the difficulty curve to be uncomfortably steep"**



» [Atari ST] Not a tennis ball in sight.

ON THE REBOUND

Originally written in 1990 but only released recently, *Terraboink* for the Atari ST is a clone of Gremlin's vertically-scrolling C64 classic *Bounder*, the action is viewed from above with the player guiding a bouncing ball along a vertically scrolling course, jumping over chasms and avoiding hazards.

We've given it a test drive and found the difficulty curve to be uncomfortably steep with a significant amount of trial and error required to get anywhere, but gamers with good reflexes and perhaps a masochistic streak can get the game from Kikstart.eu/boink-st.

HOMEBREW HEROES

Sebastian Mihai made a videogame about guiding rabbits past hazards and onto the safety of a hotel – that alone felt like a good reason to discuss his inspirations further!



THE BIG INTERVIEW Sebastian Mihai

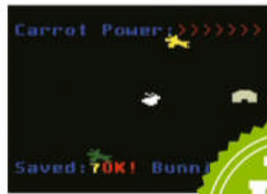
Everybody likes bunnies, but where did the idea for *Hotel Bunny* come from?

During an exceptionally harsh winter a few years ago, a rabbit settled near our house until spring. I took pity and built him a small den from a shipping box on top of which I piled snow. Since he was to reside there only temporarily, I named his den 'Hotel Bunny'. I imagined that a suburban bunny would often seek refuge from neighbourhood dogs, so I shaped the game's foes in that fashion.

As you can see from my large number of projects, my approach has always been variety over depth. I enjoy writing many, small games. This is all good, but it requires a commensurate amount of ideas. Thus, through the years, I learned to look everywhere for inspiration. So much so that I even designed and named one of my creations in a dream, while sleeping!

And roughly how long does a game like this take to program?

Hotel Bunny took about a month's worth of evenings from a core concept to its availability. I began by learning the programming language and platform capabilities from the compiler manual and samples. The next steps involved generating the idea and writing a functional skeleton of the game. At this



» [Intellivision] "You got a beautiful face, you got taste."

stage, things were very rough.

Then came gameplay and polish elements such as gauges, transition screens, success indicators, 'carrot power', sounds. During this stage, I also addressed feedback. Finally, I invested time into a mixture of level design and playtesting.

Did the design change from what you set out to write and the final game?

It did, *Hotel Bunny* had two different releases. The first version was very simple, closer to a proof-of-concept than a game. It featured one level and had no variation in enemy patterns.

The second (and final) release saw the introduction of multiple levels, each requiring a different strategy. I also took the time to polish the game, adding introduction and level transition screens, as well as sounds. In this version, the rabbit also gained a limited-use 'carrot power', granting him invulnerability for a very short time.

What sort of feedback have you received from gamers?

After the initial release, I learned two things. The first was that *Hotel Bunny*'s simplicity made it both attractive to adults who prefer a skill-based game without a steep learning curve, as well as approachable to young gamers.

The second was that the initial release was entirely too simple; it needed more meat on its bones. The improvements I made in response to this feedback were well received.

And finally, is there anything you're currently working on that our readers would find interesting?

Lately, my work has been focused on my homebrew operating system, Snowdrop OS, which I plan to turn into my platform for future game development. My near-term goal is to create a library anybody can use to create games on this OS.

» [Intellivision] Why did the rabbit cross the road?



DO YOU REMEMBER?

The lacklustre version of *Commando* for the C16 released in 1986 wasn't particularly faithful to the Capcom coin-op so, six years after that version was released, programmer Tamás 'TCFS' Sasvári decided to do something about the situation by writing his own 64K iteration which added the scrolling and a TED-powered version of Rob Hubbard's C64 soundtrack.

Some elements have been either reworked or omitted – there are no grenades so the ammo counter has been repurposed for the player's primary weapon, something the original game didn't limit – but the action is much improved over Elite's effort; limited ammo and more trigger-happy enemy forces make this more challenging than other 8-bit versions of the game, but *Commando* is still a solid shoot-'em-up for those who enjoy a good fight. Head to Kikstart.eu/commando-264 for the game.



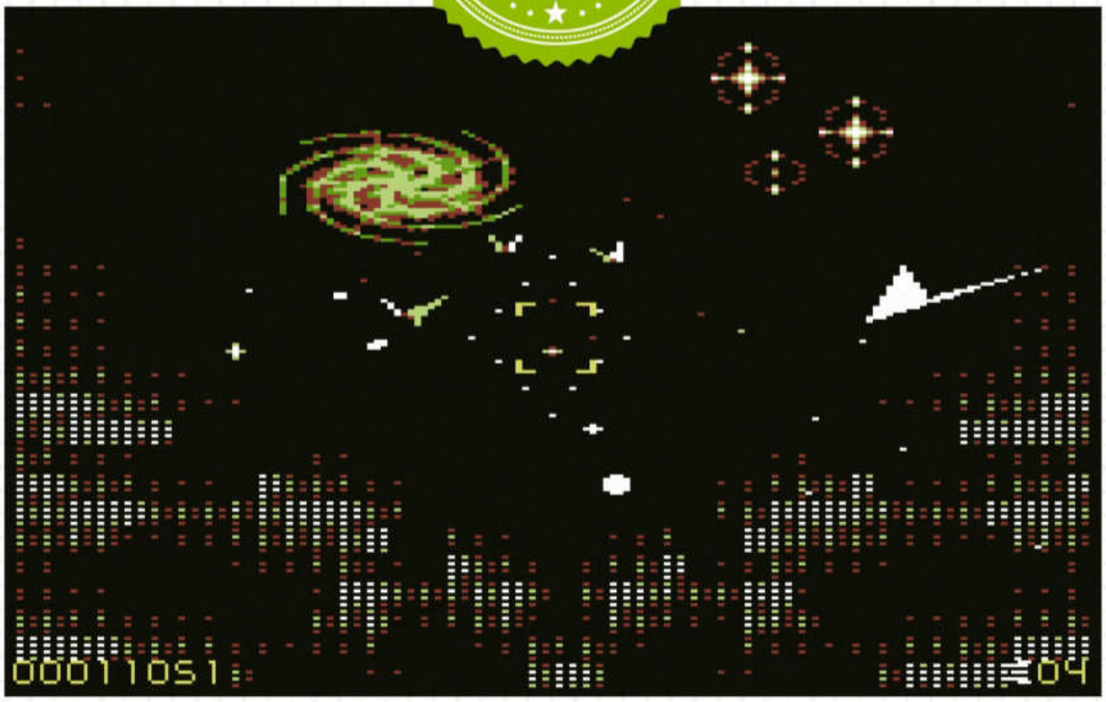
» [Plus/4] "John, stick your head out, one shot, right between the eyes."



» [Plus/4] "I remember you, scumbag, especially the people you've tortured and killed!"



Gaming REVIEWS



» [C64] Man, hyper space always looks so freaky.

SLIPSTREAM

» **FORMAT:** COMMODORE PLUS/4 AND 64 » **DEVELOPER:** BAUKNECHT » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/SLIPSTREAM-264 » **PRICE:** FREE DOWNLOAD, £TBA FOR TAPE OR DISK

Every year the Omikron system is battered by a two-day-long meteor shower; the system's inhabitants call this cataclysmic event "the days of judgement" and, when the technology became available, created a shielding station which defended the inhabited worlds of their system. All was going well until the AI robots aboard the shielding station started to disappear and, taking their given task to the extreme began roaming the local systems, classifying entire planets as meteors and destroying them! To date, they haven't obliterated any inhabited worlds but it's only a matter of time… which is where the Slipstream, a strange vehicle that resembles a paper plane flapping its wings, comes into play, since it's capable of travelling through time to deal with this mechanical menace.

Because this is an into-the-screen 3D shoot-'em-up, that means shooting at lots of robots as they swirl around while dodging their bullets; the craft can be controlled with two joysticks – one for positioning your craft to keep it out of the line of fire while the other guides the targeting cursor that locks onto enemies which are then shot down – it's also possible to play with a single stick, selecting the cursor or craft with the fire button. These control schemes both need a little acclimatisation, as does the low frame-rate of the game itself, but it doesn't take long to settle into.

There are two versions of the game available, one targeting the C64 and the other aimed at Commodore 16s with 64K of RAM or the Plus/4 – the latter version has the faster refresh speed on stock systems because those machines have a faster processor and is subsequently more playable, although C64 owners with accelerators like the SuperCPU or Turbo Chameleon will get a very fluid experience. At the time of writing we know that Psytronik is going to be releasing *Slipstream* on real, physical media, so keep an eye on Psytronik.net for any further announcements.

» Score **80%**



» [Plus/4] "The space-time continuum is not merely curved, it is in fact totally bent."



» [Plus/4] "Down a hollow to a cavern where the sun has never shone."

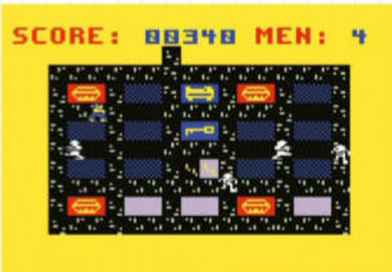


Don't forget to follow us online for all the latest retro updates

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag darran.jones@futurenet.com

OH MUMMY!

» **FORMAT:** INTELLIVISION » **PRICE:** FREE
» **DEVELOPER:** NANOCHESS
» **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/MUMMY-INTV



» [Intellivision] It's been a while since we featured *Oh Mummy!*.

Egyptian tombs can be extremely hazardous to your health, especially for explorers whose intention is to 'borrow' the various riches. In this case a tomb raider must search each level for a specific artefact – in this case a game cartridge – and the key which grants access to the next, more perilous stage. As the player moves around a trail of footsteps appears and opening a sarcophagus involves walking around all four sides but this is easier said than done while manoeuvring around the tomb's skeletal protectors.

Some players might find that the short piece of looping music looping in the background to be grating after time, but *Oh Mummy!* for the Intellivision captures the no frills *Amidar*-inspired action of the Amstrad CPC game well. Each level is trickier than the last but planning ahead will help, as does the Scroll Of Ancient Intellivision Wisdom which allows one skeleton to be vanquished.

>> Score **79%**



» [Intellivision] "The ghouls all came from their humble abodes to get a jolt from my electrodes."

SLIME CENTER

» **FORMAT:** MSX » **DEVELOPER:** N.I » **PRICE:** FREE
» **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/SLIME-MSX

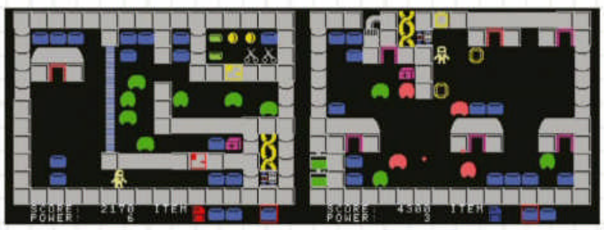


The Slime Center has been overrun by a horde of escaped slime creatures and that's more than enough reason to be leaving because these gooey creatures slowly drain the player's energy. There are some items lying around which will prove helpful including colour-coded keys to open doors, useful medical kits which counteract the effect of the slime on the player and explosive devices which make a sticky mess of the already sticky nasties.

The graphics and sound are primitive but still functional and it's the gameplay where *Slime Center* really shines. Although the bombs are powerful and have quite a bit of range, the limited supply means that indiscriminate use isn't the best approach and a little timing and strategy must be applied, which in turn leads to quite a few incredibly satisfying moments where the debris from a single explosion rips through several enemies one after the other.

>> Score **85%**

» [MSX] Slime in this ear, slime in that ear, don't you ever yearn for change?



ROUNDUP

The SEUCK Game Creation Compo 2016 finished at the end of January 2017 and offered up a collection of new action games created with Sensible Software's venerable *Shoot-'Em-Up Construction Kit* for the C64. There are some scrolling shooters of course, but *SEUCK* users have always found ways to tell other stories so there's some variety in the nine games.

Kikstart.eu/seuck-2016-c64 will nudge browsers towards the CSDb's entry for the competition which in turn has links to pages for the releases themselves where they can be downloaded.



GPAC DEMENTIA DEFENDER

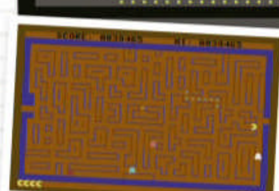
» **FORMAT:** COMMODORE 64 » **DEVELOPER:** GRAY DEFENDER » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/GPAC-C64 » **PRICE:** FREE

GPAC is a former doctor who, having spent his life eating poorly, is now a convert to healthy living. To this end he decides to break into an almost maze-like warehouse storing all manner of food supplements and 'vita pills' with the ultimate aim being to consume everything without succumbing to his demons who bear an uncanny resemblance to ghosts.

Just a glance at the screenshots should hint that *GPAC Dementia Defender* is based on the coin-op classic *Pac-Man* but also has quite a bit in common with the clones that appeared in the early Eighties on home computers. The developer has put his own slant on the gameplay rather than copying the original directly – the score dished out for each consumed pill decreases over time so eating them quickly is encouraged – which, combined with the smaller graphics and a shallower difficulty curve, change the experience in an interesting way.

>> Score **77%**





» [C64] Running around in dark rooms, munching pills – we've been here before.





MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY… SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON THE ONLINE FORUM – **WWW.RETROGAMER.NET**

WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a copy of our latest eMag, **Retro Gamer Load 3**, a bargain if ever there was one





STAR LETTER

BUBBLE BUSTER



» [GameCube] Always sell rarities such as *Fire Emblem: Path Of Radiance* yourself to ensure maximum profit.

Dear **RG** team,

It was with interest that I read the letter from Andy Phillips in issue 166 of **Retro Gamer**, as I have also been thinking about the price of retro gaming lately. However, I differ from him in one major respect: I believe that retro gaming is undergoing a price bubble, one which will soon burst in the near future.

I recently picked up a collection locally, and looked to save myself some time by selling the excess games to a high street store. However, I found the experience to be disappointing. I started off with CeX, and found that they routinely offer cash buy prices of 20-25 per cent the sale price. A nearby independent store was no better, citing competition in the market.

I understand that shops need to make a profit, but I can't see how they will continue to get stock if they continue to offer such poor deals buy-in deals, while charging eBay prices without having eBay's range. I've already seen two local retro gaming stores fold in the last few years, flooding stock back out into the market at more sensible prices, and I can't imagine it's long before others follow suit.

Graham Williams



» [GameCube] What do you mean? You'll only offer me £2 for *Resident Evil 4*?

We had a look at CeX's website and found that its cash offers for some games did indeed include some low ones – £2 for games like *Resident Evil 4* or *Sonic The Hedgehog* that it sells for £10. However, a fair number of buy prices were also far closer to the sell prices, in the region of 40-50 per cent. Our local stores seem to have good stock of retro, suggesting that some customers are happy with these rates.

As for your retail failure theory, it's interesting but we're not sure we agree. The problem is that while people might keep a few cheap games for themselves, mostly they'll take advantage of their savings by putting their acquisitions on eBay for a quick buck, keeping prices stable in the process.

MSXTRA

Hi Darran/**Retro Gamer** team,

Is there any chance you could do a feature on the MSX range of computers in the future? They were quite an unsung piece of hardware technically, using the same graphic chip as the ColecoVision and the AY sound chip etc.

Alison Bewick

It's certainly been a while since we covered the MSX – since the Retroinspection feature in issue 60, it has mostly featured in the Homebrew section of the magazine. There's more ground to cover, so we'll look at some of its best games next issue.

SCRAPING THE BARREL

Hi **RG**

Bubsy 3D jogged up a memory of my time as a nine-year-old playing a game which I never thought was deemed truly terrible. That game was *Rise Of The Robots*.

So fast forward to my 13-year-old self when I got *Fade To Black* as a Christmas present from my folks. At the time it was a good game which was blighted by awkward camera angles and hard puzzle solving. But as mentioned in your magazine, it laid the groundwork for all third-person shooters, for example *Resident Evil 4*.

Is it possible you could include a future segment on the worst games ever with *Shaq Fu* and the god awful *Mortal Kombat* clones included as well?

Cisko Kidd

Covering all the worst games ever in a single feature would be quite a task. However, we used to run a regular Retro Shamer section, which singled out dreadful games of years gone by for well-deserved ridicule. It hasn't made an appearance since issue 112, though – let us know if you'd like to see it make a comeback!

OUT AND ABOUT

Hi **Retro Gamer**,

I'd really love it if you could publish an events calendar of all the retro gaming markets/events/festivals for the year across the UK.

Emma Ward

We'd certainly like to bring together such a list, but it might be better suited to the website than the magazine – that would allow us to better respond in the event that details change.

GREETINGS FROM OZ!

Hello **Retro Gamer**,

Greetings from Victoria, Australia! I live in the country about three hours north of Melbourne. Your magazine is popular where I live and can be found in our local newsagents. I am a 42-year-old with two kids now aged



» [Mega Drive] Do you, like Cisko Kidd, want to see more terrible games in **Retro Gamer**? If so, let us know.

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» An event listing is a good idea, but we think it might work better online.

eight and five. Because of my kids I have gotten back into gaming and I game on the Nintendo Wii U, 3DS and soon to be the Switch. My kids love all things Nintendo, which I am happy with as I grew up on the NES and SNES, Mega Drive, Commodore 64 and Amiga. Back in the day that’s all I remember, fond memories of growing up and playing those systems with my friends. As I grew up, life took over and gaming took a backseat. But I was always a gamer at heart, always downloading a retro game to my iPad or buying retro games from Steam for my laptop.

Now as my kids are a bit more independent, and my career is good, I realised that my whole life up until now I have always been on the move – from one job to another, to a different city or state, so I have always had a minimalist way of thinking. Sadly because of this I never kept my old gaming systems or game boxes but now I have the need to fill that void. I would love to buy a retro console like Commodore 64, Amiga or NES. My kids love playing plug-in-and-play games, no online patches, no waiting, just playing. I have the recent Sega Mega Drive AtGames and it was cheap and awesome. The new NES Classic Mini is hard to come by but I would gladly buy three of them – one for my kids, one for me and one as a trophy on the shelf.

Fingers crossed boxed copies never die out completely. My PC game boxes now replace my book collection. I was surprised how so many people who come and visit our house comment how they love to game, and by the conversations that come from just noticing the game boxes on the shelf. If everything is digital those conversations could never happen.

Great magazine, keep up the good work!

Cameron Hill

Many thanks for the letter. We’re glad to hear that your kids have reignited your love of gaming, and we’re sure that in years to come they’ll treasure their memories.

Fortunately, we don’t see boxed games going anywhere just yet, as Limited Run Games has proven that there are still plenty of people who crave physical releases.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Darran’s Vita Collection

In order to help out our colleagues on *gamesTM*, Darran decided to bring his whole PlayStation Vita collection into the office. That’s no small feat – he’s got over 100 games, including a ridiculous number of big boxed limited editions, which made it quite the talking point within the office.







From the forum

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on the forum and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What are your favourite Mario Kart memories?

RodimusPrime
Groups of us staring at screenshots in magazines, then one of my friends’ parents had bought him it for Christmas and hidden it. He found it but did not have a SNES yet. His parents went away for the weekend and I took my SNES round and about six of us piled into his house, and we all stayed there the entire weekend playing the game. What a great time.

TheDude18
Ghost Valley 1. Multiplayer with my mates and *that* shortcut. A simple map, even by original *Mario Kart* standards, but yet perfect. And once we discovered that the shortcut can be taken with a mushroom, as well as the less risky feather power-up, it was game on.

flatapex
I was a Mega Drive kid, but my friend Nick had a SNES and *Mario Kart*. He would usually beat me quite comprehensively but every so often I would fling a mushroom and take his character out with it. The only person that was as surprised as him was me, very satisfying.

antsbull
Playing *Mario Kart 64* in the middle of the night with my first girlfriend after working night shifts flipping burgers. Then having to sneak in and stealthily take the cartridge (among others) from her place after we broke up.

Mayhem
I’ve played *Mario Kart* since the first one was released back in 1992. One memory is attempting to play *Mario Kart DS* online due to Nintendo’s insistence on using WEP for handshaking, not WPA. So I remember piggybacking downstairs’ unsecured WEP Wi-Fi to play, instead of having to constantly alter my own router’s configuration! And how worth it it was to, it was brilliant to play online despite the snaking.

mrmessy
In late 1993 and early 1994, two friends of mine would come round to my house on Sunday evenings to play *Mario Kart* as a bit of fun before the working week started. We would play three two-player Grand Prix games and then add the scores up on paper to determine the winner. There was no simultaneous three player on the original *MK* of course. I think I still have the note book with the scores written in it somewhere.

kiwimike
Tense trash-talking multiplayer nights on GameCube especially. Most multiplayer nights consisted of *Monkey Ball*, then the ‘Marios’ – *Kart* and *Golf* or *Party*. Kart was the best kick start to an evening.

mr jenzie
SCREW YOU ICE BLOCKS! But I was ‘technically’ good at it…

merman
Playing my nephew at the Wii version one Christmas was a lot of fun, perched on beanbags waving the wheels in the air. And I love the way Nintendo have paid respect to the series by including retro courses in each new release.

retro GAMER

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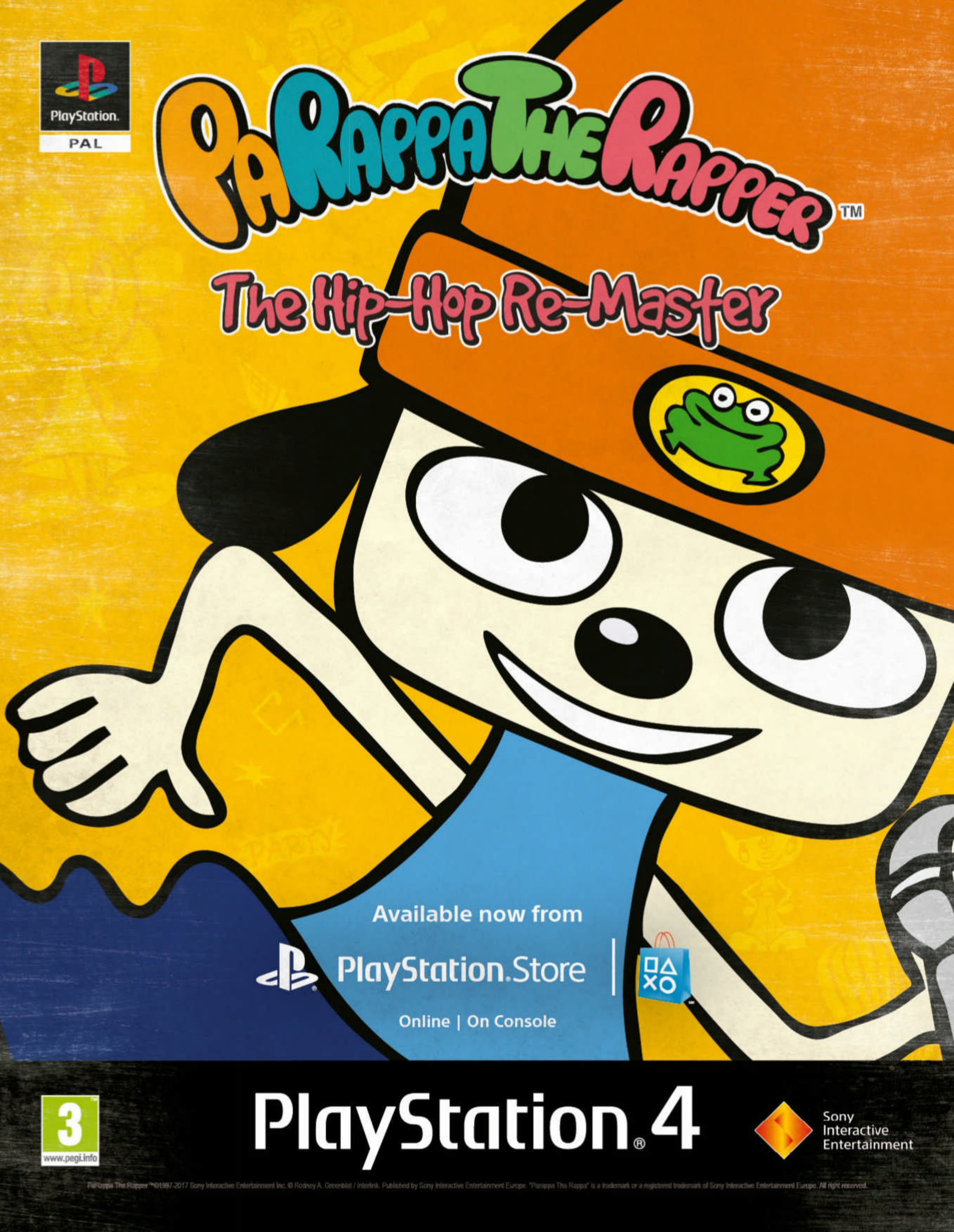
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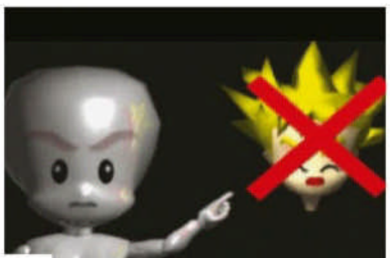
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ENDGAME



VIRTUA FIGHTER KIDS: SARAH BRYANT'S ENDING

» We're not sure who was asking for a version of Virtua Fighter 2 in which all the characters are large-headed children, but Sega answered their call anyway. We're scared of the children with beards, bald heads and grey hair, so let's follow Sarah Bryant. She's just as brainwashed and crazy as her adult counterpart, and now we get to see what she does after winning the World Fighting Tournament…



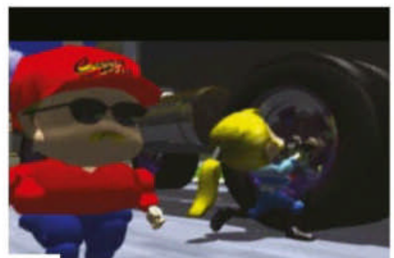
01

» Okay Sarah, you've got one job. Dural wants you to eliminate your brother, Jacky Bryant. Now, he might be a world-class martial artist, but so are you – and you've got the advantage of being brainwashed, so you're totally ruthless too.



02

» Unfortunately, while your brainwashing did rid you of pesky things like emotion and free will, it didn't imbue you with a sense of basic coordination. So, like an utter buffoon, you trip on a can and headbutt the tarmac.



03

» No worries – as they say, when you get thrown off a horse, you have to get back up and shoot it. Let's go again! Wait, Sarah, you're going the wro- bloody hell, she's run into a truck. It's big enough that you think she'd notice it.



04

» Right, you've got one more chance before we consign you to the Wile E Coyote Retirement Home For Ineffective Villains. There's Jacky, with his stupid haircut that makes even non-villains want to hit him. Don't screw this up… Success! One somersault kick to the jaw – nice work, Sarah! Now run!



05

» Oh for crying out loud, she ran straight into a Sega sign while making her getaway, leaving Jacky an opening for retribution. It looks like Judgement 6 is going to have to reconsider recruitment processes, because this brainwashing lark is clearly useless if it produces absolute incompetents like Sarah.


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